

# SIXTY INDIAN BIRDS



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TEXT AND PHOTOGRAPHS BY

R. S. DHARMAKUMARSINHJI  
and  
K. S. LAVKUMAR

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PUBLICATIONS DIVISION

Who would not like to listen to the chorus of birds on a spring morning? Who would not like to admire the beauty and variety of colours in their plumage? Yet, except for the few bird-watchers and fewer ornithologists, there seems to be a general lack of sustained interest among people in knowing more about the birds whom they love to hear or whose beauty they admire. Birds being an integral part of our fauna, there is need for promoting, specially among the young, greater awareness about birds and their behaviour as an essential part of general understanding of nature and ecology.

This book, **Sixty Indian Birds** goes a long way in meeting this need. The authors, Shri R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji, former Vice-Chairman of the Indian Board for Wild Life, recipient of first National Prize in 1956 for his book **Birds of Saurashtra** and Certificate of Merit in the Country Life International Exhibition of Wild Life Photography, March, 1950, the Central Hall, Westminster, London, England, also President of the Expert Committee on Wild Life Conservation in India (1970) and Shri K. S. Lavkumar have spent many useful years in making deep and dedicated study of bird life and, therefore, are in a position to write with authority and first hand knowledge. As they rightly point out, the book is primarily meant to encourage young Indians to take keener interest in the bird life of their country. The narrative is simple and brief and gives fascinating account of avian behaviour. A distinctive feature of this profusely illustrated volume is that the colour as well as monochrome photographs were taken by Shri R. S. Dharmakumarsinhji in the natural habitat of birds after long, arduous and patient waiting in each case. The narrative is a product of careful study made during those excursions.

There are nearly two thousand varieties of Birds in India. Sixty birds—some common and others not so common—have been selected for presentation in this book only because these were the ones of which good photographs could be taken and about which the authors could write with fairly accurate knowledge. The book is a major contribution to the understanding of bird life in India and should be of interest to all, specially bird lovers at home and abroad.

**Bird on front cover :**

**Indian Roller**

**Bird on back cover**

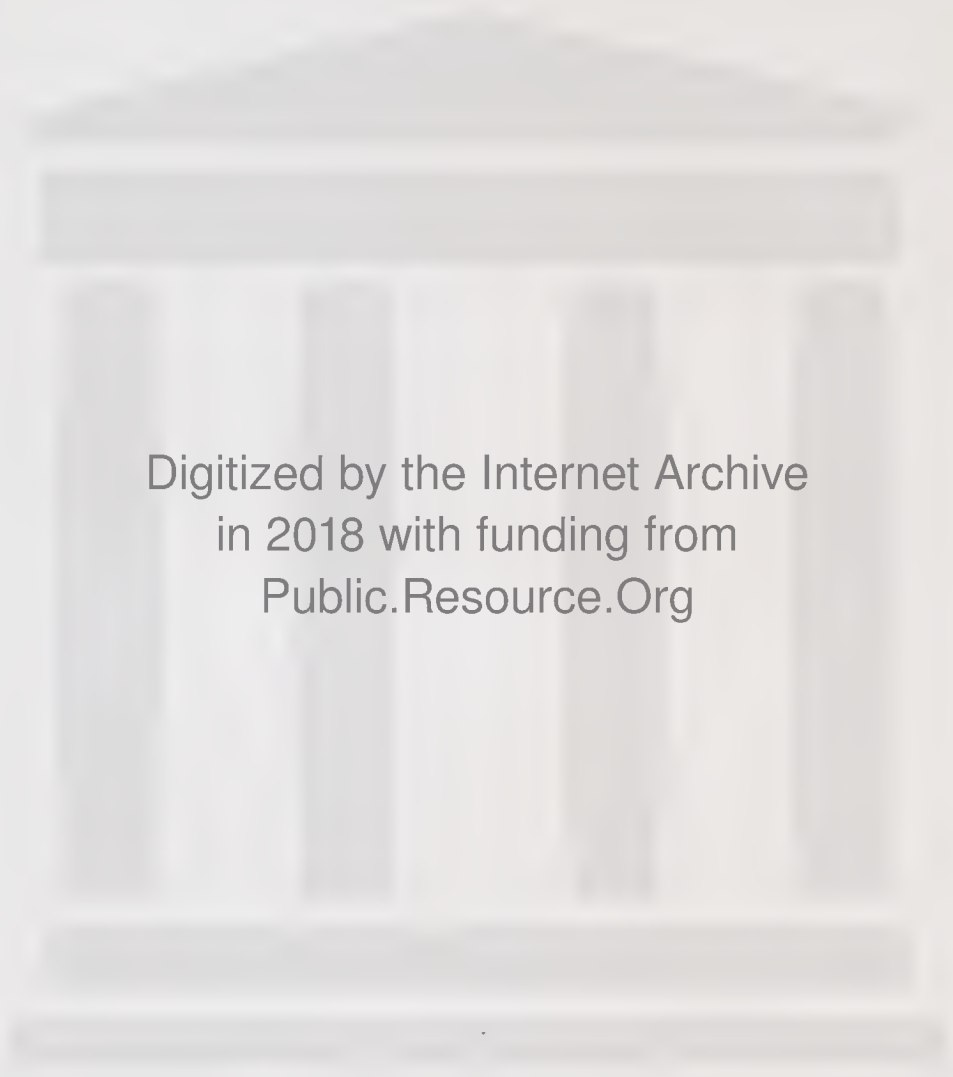
**Small Minivets**







SIXTY INDIAN BIRDS



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# SIXTY INDIAN BIRDS

*Text and Photographs by*

R. S. DHARMAKUMARSINHJI

AND

K. S. LAVKUMAR

*Foreword by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi*

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सत्यमेव जयते

## PRIME MINISTER

### FOREWORD

We all feel more relaxed among people and things we know. Yet few of us make the effort to get acquainted with our environment. To recognise trees and plants, to be able to identify different species of birds, gives one a sense of belonging, adds immeasurably to one's interest in life and the enriching of one's personality.

There are several excellent books on Indian birds. I hope Shri Dharmakumarsinhji's book also will help to enlarge the circle of nature lovers in our country.

*Indira Gandhi*

(Indira Gandhi)

New Delhi

March 4, 1972



## PREFACE

THE purpose of this illustrated book on Indian birds is to encourage young Indians to take keener interest in the bird life of their country. Bird watching and bird photography are not uncommon in India. Many of our boys and girls are able to recognise some of the commoner Indian birds. But all bird lovers are not ornithologists; in writing this book, therefore, we have avoided using technical terms and have kept the narrative as simple and brief as possible. In the case of some birds, we have given short descriptive notes on how we photographed them in their natural habitat and what was their behaviour at that time.

Bird photography takes considerable time and one can never be sure of results. So, we have selected birds of which we have fairly accurate knowledge and which we were able to photograph to our satisfaction. The selection is both of birds which are common and those which are not so common, and we hope this mixture will be of interest to bird lovers throughout the country.

It is too big a task to photograph in colour and in their natural surroundings all the birds found in this vast country. So some illustrations in monochrome have been added. We hope that our meagre collection of photographs will be a source of encouragement to bird lovers in India and abroad and that the information we have given will be of some value to the growing tribe of bird watchers.

All our work has been done in the field and the photographs were taken mostly from a "hide". The hide, which is also known as "blind", is a structure used for the concealment of the photographer while he is photographing birds. In fact the hide is an essential accessory to the bird photographer; without it he cannot take suitable portraits of birds at their nests. The hide may be designed according to the purpose for which it is to be used, and can thus be of any shape. However, more important is the distance at which the hide is placed when taking photographs of birds at their nests. Birds do not tolerate interference near their nests and should the hide be placed too close to a nest the chances of the nest being forsaken or destroyed are many. Bird photography, therefore, should be carried out in stages and far enough from the nest so as not to disturb the parent birds. Furthermore, in order not to disturb the nest and eggs and expose them to the danger of predators, it is important to refrain from overdoing what is termed "gardening", that is removing obstructive material coming in the way of taking clear photographs; where this has to be done,

it is necessary to replace carefully and in its proper place what has been removed to ensure the safety of the nest.

In our work, we have used tele-lenses when necessary and in most cases used a miniature 35 mm camera which we have found handy and less expensive. We are fully aware that on a small stamp-size format as 35 mm it is difficult to reproduce large enlargements showing great detail. It is our good luck that most of our pictures are in sharp focus. However, we hope our shortcomings will be overlooked.

R. S. DHARMAKUMARSINHJI  
K. S. LAVKUMAR

Dil Bahar  
Bhavnagar



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## ASHYCROWNED FINCH-LARK

ONE OF THE commonest birds found in India is the small sparrow-like Ashycrowned Finch-Lark. The male's breast and lower parts are black, and the bird is, therefore, also known as the Blackbellied Finch-Lark. The black lores, the white cheek patch and the ashy grey crown are conspicuous. The female is a plain dusty brown bird, much like a house sparrow. This species has a short tail and is broad-shouldered having a roundish appearance. It is found in a variety of terrain from open desert to forested country.

The Ashycrowned Finch-Lark is usually found in pairs or small flocks and though it may be seen perched on bushes and telegraph wires, it prefers to settle on the ground. The birds frequent arid open country with stones and grass here and there. Though it may also be seen on the sea-shore and treeless flat country it is not found far from cultivation. In winter the birds may be seen in large flocks. During the breeding season, which is a prolonged one, almost throughout the year, varying in different parts of the country, the bird is easily recognised by its courtship display. The cock bird rises some height above the ground and then makes a series of headlong swoops until it alights suddenly on the ground. This diving display is accompanied by a whistling song. Apart from this the bird emits a chirrup-like call.

The Ashycrowned Finch-Lark is a confiding bird being used to human habitation. The birds nest in all types of country but avoid long grass and thick vegetation. The nest is a neat cup made of grass and often lined with hair or other soft material. It is placed in open ground under the protection of a stone, hoofmark, tuft of grass or small plant. The rather deep cup is well concealed and inconspicuous in which two to three greyish brown eggs are laid. Both sexes incubate and rear the young. It is not difficult to photograph the birds at nest once they become used to the hide, though we found that the danger to the young from predators like the House Crow was enhanced when the hide was brought close to the nest. We had therefore to place the hide far away before bringing it close to the nest. Even with such precautions casualty to the young was rather high. So once we had taken photographs of the birds and the young, we saw to the removal of the hide immediately.

The young nestlings are of a pale yellowish colour, which matches beautifully with their surroundings. During the heat of the day when the sun was directly striking the nest, both the parents shaded the young. It was the heat and direct sunlight that was a greater danger to the nestlings than the nocturnal predators which were no doubt a constant menace to them. A large number of nests we found were destroyed of their contents the next morning we visited them, and thus we were convinced that many nestlings of this species are robbed by various ground predators. We also noticed that the birds bred in the same patch of ground year after year and it was therefore not difficult to locate the nests in such areas. The birds feed on seeds and insects and usually on the ground. They have a peculiar gait—rapidly running and then suddenly stopping. They also indulge frequently in dusting themselves. The flight of this bird is undulating and fairly low to the ground.

## BAYA OR WEAVER BIRD

**T**HIS LITTLE PASSERINE bird, the size of a sparrow, has the ingenious capacity for weaving a nest of grass which no human hand can copy. The Baya comes into prominence during its breeding season when the males are in their bright plumage. At other times, the sombre-coloured males and females seek refuge in forests and are inconspicuous. At the end of the hot weather and at the beginning of the monsoon the Bayas emigrate from their forest retreats and fly to open areas where they expect to find their nesting material of grass or strips of millet leaves and even certain reeds. If the rains have not arrived, the birds collect in large numbers in scrub and in reed beds close to lakes. Here they make a tremendous noise at roosting time. By the time the rains arrive, the male Bayas assume their bright yellow plumage.

Soon after the first rains have fallen, and the grass has begun to sprout, the male Bayas in small and large flocks select certain trees or sites for building. These trees are usually thorny with their branches overhanging roads, fields or water. It may be that they select other sites also where they are not prone to danger. It is the males that build the nests. The birds nest in colony. At this time, one may hear from a distance a chorus of rather harsh bird song from a colony which is actively constructing its nests.

The next is a round, hanging bag-like structure with a tubular entrance and is closely interwoven with fibre. It is strongly tied at the base and can withstand the severe monsoon weather, swinging in the wind and rain, without falling to pieces. Colonies may vary from half a dozen nests to a few dozens and one may come across occasionally a solitary nest.



At times, a colony with half-made nests may be forsaken, and it is said that these nests are made by the males when they arrive newly and before they have had time to select better sites for nesting.

In the month of July, soon after the rains had set in, we found a small colony of Weaver Birds nesting in a well. Some bushes and small trees growing on the sides and inside an earthen well was the site selected by the birds. Nesting was in active progress, males coming and going and making a tremendous noise as they took a brief respite from their laborious work. There was no need to set up a hide, though we did, for photographing the birds, as they were not shy and were quick in getting used to our presence.

However, every time we approached the nests, the males would suddenly stop, and there would be silence. Then after a few minutes, seeing that there was no danger, the birds would commence their work in a characteristically noisy manner.

The cock birds, with their bright yellow crowns and breast, looked handsome. The mantle had a deep golden yellow with brown stripes which showed off over their brown plumage. Every time a batch of cock birds alighted on their nests they would emit their monotonous whistling song, raising their crown feathers sometimes while doing so. The hen birds had also collected and would be sitting perched on neighbouring bushes watching the cock birds building their nests. When the nests were half-built the cock birds would get excited, spreading and waving their wings and calling loudly inviting the hens to alight on their nests. At this stage, the hens would often fly to a nest, alight on it, and then suddenly fly away only to sit on some bush closeby. When a hen bird alighted on a nest, almost all the cocks would commence a sort of courtship, singing as they did, and we often noticed that the hen could not always decide on which nest to choose. The mass courtship of males was a wonderful sight, a continuous movement which would suddenly stop at its height, and then begin all over again to last the whole day.

We made an estimate of the number of birds in the colony and it came to about two dozen birds. There were only seven fully built nests, and four half-built ones. One nest in the colony was extra long, with two egg chambers superimposed one upon the other. It was not an old nest on which a new one was built like many we have seen but an entirely new one. Inside the walls of the well, was a pair of common mynas nesting, and also a number of blue rock-pigeons which merely had their roost and old nests. When it rained, the colony did not seem so cheerful, but no sooner the rain ceased than the birds would sing in chorus, and commence their work.

The drab, sparrowlike hen weaver Bird alone incubates the three to four white eggs which are laid. A small part inside the nest is often plastered with mud and why this is so is not clear. That the hen Weaver selects the next made by the cock at an early stage is obvious, as we have seen her

take keen interest in the nest-building and later we have seen her lining it with soft material. Feeding of nestlings is done mostly by the female. The fledglings are open to the danger of being drowned, or devoured by turtles, frogs, fish or water snakes, if they fail in their first flight to reach the upper branches of the host tree or those that may be closeby. We have frequently seen fledglings lying on the surface of the water after they had drowned.

The Baya is known to be a pest to grain crops as it feeds much upon seeds and grain. During the breeding season, however, the nestlings are fed with insect food and what actual harm does the Baya do not millet and such other grain crops has not been adequately assessed. Most of the farmers we meet complain more about the Rosy Pastor than about the Baya as a danger to ripening millet.

In winter, one may see Weaver Birds in small and large flocks, the males losing their bright plumage and joining the females to emigrate into the forest areas for the coming hot weather. They are then rather inconspicuous amongst the hordes of winter migrants that come to the plains from the colder regions. The nests which are vacated are often made use of by Munias, and we have seen the White-throated Munias lining the Weaver Birds' nests with soft feathers for their own purpose. We have also seen this species interfering and building in the Baya's nest while the Baya's colony was in progress. At a colony, we observed that the Bayas preferred to perch on tops of bushes and trees and keep an erect pose whenever there was such an interference. The cock birds would often flutter their wings and spread their tails in display. The bills of the male were blackish in contrast with those of females which were horny brown or yellowish at the base of the lower mandible.

The Baya is a bird that can be trained to perform, the male birds being used for the purpose by Indian trainers. The bird is so dexterous with its bill that it can thread beads and make a necklace. It can select a particular number of a card and bring it to hand. It can pick up a sweet or small edible piece such as cardamom or clove and place it in the mouth or hand and even tap a musical instrument to make a song according to the trainer's instruction. It can even paint a picture with a brush.

## **BHAVNAGAR'S SANDLARK**

**T**HIS SUB-SPECIES of the Sandlark had never been photographed at its nest before. We were naturally keen to photograph it at its nest. This Sandlark is about the size of a sparrow and has the upper parts greyish khaki with the lower parts dull white, the khaki breast being striped with



brown. The tail is almost square, with the central feathers khaki black and the outer pairs almost white. A pale white supercilium is present. The bill is slender and blackish. The legs are fleshy yellow. The sexes are alike though in the male the crown feathers are more conspicuous than in the female forming a tuft of streaked feathers. This race of Sandlark inhabits the mud flats of Bhavnagar district in Gujarat State. The bird is easily recognised from its characteristic call which once heard is easily remembered.

It was during monsoon in the month of August that we found a nest of this bird. It was a neat cup made of fine grass and situated half-way up the embankment of a metre gauge railway line, passing through mud flats. The sloping embankment consisted mostly of loose stone, grass and a bluish grey plant which was profuse all along the embankment. The nest was facing north-east. It contained two young fledglings which were of pale ashy grey colour.

We arranged the hide as quickly as possible as we knew the fledglings would leave the nest within a day or two. We could not take the risk of allowing the hide to remain for any length of time close to the nest, lest crows and other predators should devour the young. The Sandlark is a confiding bird permitting close approach and, therefore, it was not difficult for us to take the required pictures. The nest was unfortunately rather deep in a clump of the succulent *Sueda* plant so we could not remove sufficient portion of the plant which protected the nest without exposing its position to predators. We were, therefore, obliged to leave the nest as it was while we photographed the birds. For the first few hours in the morning the Sandlarks were a bit suspicious of the hide and the lens but soon they were convinced that the noise of the camera shutter was harmless to them and they began to feed the fledglings continuously during the morning. Both the birds brought mouthful of insects which were caught from the green vegetation and grass along the embankment not very far from the nest. Actually we could see the birds hunting for insects on the ground and then flying back near the nest ready to feed the fledglings. The parent birds often alighted close to the embankment or on it and then walked to the nest cautiously before feeding the young. The fledglings opened their gapes wide disclosing their reddish yellow mouth parts, and were then fed after which the parent birds removed the excreta and at times swallowed it. We could recognise the cock bird from its more robust build and by his crown feathers which formed a broad crest. Both the birds incessantly fed the fledglings from early morning to noon and then again in the afternoon till after sunset. The cock bird would sometimes fly up in the sky, aimlessly hover in mid air as if dancing, changing position all the time and singing rather monotonously. The height maintained was not much and the song was continued only for a short time after which the bird dropped to earth alighting in a swooping manner. We saw the cock bird singing sometimes on the ground for a short while, and in front of its mate. There was, however, nothing remarkable that we noticed about the Sandlark except that it

could tolerate all types of traffic close to its nest, the railway line being not more than three metres from the nest. In fact the entire earth below the embankment trembled when a train passed by and the birds just sat at the base of the embankment without concern. There was motor traffic next to the rails and a human path about 1.5 metres from the nest. In spite of such constant flow of men and machines close to the nest the birds were not at all disturbed.

The Sandlark lays two to three eggs which are white and spotted with light and dark brown markings, sometimes mixed with grey. At the commencement of the breeding season a number of pairs may be seen selecting their territory at a distance of a few hundred metres along the railway embankment and invariably their nests would face the northern side protected from the south-west monsoon. Yet according to our experience the heavy rains during the monsoon wash away many of the nests. We have often seen two cock birds sparring with their wings spread at their sides and with their crest raised, facing each other. Most of their food is caught on the ground or just above it after being flushed. In the winter months we have seen the birds in small flocks when they are in moult. We have also found nests in February and March. There are two other Larks of this species found in India, the Ganges and the Indus Sandlarks.

## BLACKBELLIED TERN

**S**MALLER THAN THE Indian River Tern, this species is indeed more handsome. It is recognised by its white cheeks and throat, smoky grey breast, jet black to sepia abdomen, orange-red feet, black cap, grey upper parts and the orange-yellow bill. The tail is deeply forked; the wings are slim and taper sharply at the tips. This tern is often seen in the same habitat as the River Tern. Unlike the River Tern, it does not always gather in large flocks and shows a lesser tendency to breed in colonies. The breeding season coincides with that of the River Tern but we have found it breeding slightly earlier, in January and February, and eggs have been seen as late as May. The Blackbellied Tern is a master in the air, and those who have seen it turn and dive while flying have full admiration for it. The torpedo-shaped body appears ideal for speed. We have often observed the Blackbellied Tern chasing house crows, kites and eagles uttering its sharp short cry as it stooped on them, driving them away from its nesting ground.

We had found a nest of this bird (containing only one egg) not far from that of the River Tern's nest which we had been photographing. Generally two eggs are laid, sometimes three. They are sandy-buff, splashed with reddish-brown and grey. The eggs are laid in a scrape-

nest in the sand and made by the parents. We have not yet found any grass or twig lining to their nests as it is found in some nests of the River Tern. However, we have seen some nests lined with small shells. The sexes are alike and both birds incubate. The parent bird, sometime moistens its belly and covers the eggs and the young to keep them cool during the hot time. Soon after the chicks emerge from the eggs they are enticed away from the scrape-nest and a new scrape is often made close by after which one or more are made. Whether this is done in all cases we are not quite sure, but we have seen some breeding pairs doing it. The parent birds shade the young during the hot hours for a few days after they are hatched. When they grow older they are left in the sun for longer periods. The chick is fed with small fish and insect life. When the young are fully fledged and able to fly, they have smoky grey lower parts, and a bill paler than that of the adult bird. The upper parts including the crown are light grey.

The Blackbellied Tern is found throughout India, in lakes, rivers, and on the sea-coast. Breeding colonies consisting of this species alone are seldom encountered except in the larger rivers. A common sight is to see a single bird flying over the water with slow wing beats and then suddenly diving almost vertically into the water with a splash and then rising in the air with a small fish in its bill. It is capable of flying rapidly with fast wing-beats and turning swiftly in the air when chasing other birds. With the increase of irrigation tanks and lakes in the country, the distribution of the Blackbellied Tern should be widespread and it is hoped that every bird-watcher will have the pleasure of seeing this species close to where he is living. In winter, the black belly of the bird changes into a pearly grey with the crown mottled.

During the breeding season, the Blackbellied Tern, like the River Tern, cannot tolerate an intruder in its nesting territory. On sighting a bird of prey flying over or near its nesting grounds, one or both parents leave the nest and fly to attack immediately. In a nesting colony in which both River Terns and this species are found one may see an entire colony take to wing, calling, attacking, defending their eggs from a group of invading house crows. When a soaring eagle high in the heavens is spied, a sitting bird may just cock its head to have a look at it so long as it is high overhead. It is strange that we have never seen an eagle swoop down to the fledglings of the terns during our observations, but we have seen house crows steal eggs by making concreted raids on nesting colonies on islands in lakes and rivers.



## BLACK DRONGO

**T**HE BLACK DRONGO or King Crow is one of the most familiar birds of India. A jet black bird with a long forked tail, perched on telegraph wires, is a common sight. From its vantage point it sallies forth after flying insects or to fly down to the ground to pick up some sluggish arthropod in the grass. Black Drongos have very short legs and so cannot walk or hop over the ground but if no other higher perch is available they settle on ploughed stubble following the plough with an ever alert eye for insects or those disturbed by the feet of beasts and men alike. For the same purpose they ride the backs of grazing cattle, goats, sheep and other ungulates.

At times the Black Drongo is not averse to a little highway robbery and keep a side glance at a hoopoe or wagtail rummaging on the ground searching for its food and if he sees an insect being caught he will make a dash at the bird and try to rob it of its prey, for the Drongo is a bold bird having little hesitation in tackling creatures larger than itself. Apart from these occasional acts of victimisation of more gentle birds, the Drongo seldom harms any bird or mammal, however small and helpless it might be. On the other hand it is a recognised fact that weaker birds like doves and orioles build their nests under its protection when the Drongo is nesting. Woebetide any foolhardy pilferer approaching anywhere near a nesting pair of Drongos, for he will be in trouble as the Drongo will immediately attack him with a determination and speed that will confuse the trespasser making him forget the purpose of his visit. On one occasion we have seen a Drongo rise almost vertically up to a crow, catching its tail-feathers in its bill and sending it down to the ground in a spin. Even kites and eagles are not safe from the unflattering attentions of these dare-devils. We have seen a Drongo clinging on to the back of a vulture in its attempt to chase it away from its nest. In fact so immune are these Drongos from the general run of feathered vermin that they build their nest on the very edge of a tree and with no concealment. The pair we photographed had built in a sparsely leaved, gnarled old tree right below the morning and evening flights of crows roosting in trees nearby. Another bird would have lost its very first egg.

The Drongo's nest is a flimsy cup of woven roots suspended in a horizontal fork at the very extremity of a branch. It may be situated from about two metres to any height up in a tree. The eggs, normally four in number, are often visible from below the nest, the side of the nest always being stronger. The eggs are pinkish with dark blotches and are good to look at. Black Drongos begin nesting from the middle of the hot weather right into the monsoon. Prior to pairing, the couples sit opposite each other on a branch or on the ground bobbing and harshly calling to one another. Very often these birds indulge in this premarital display.

Being fearless by nature, the Drongos are not disturbed by the closeness





*The author in camp*



*White Egret and Spoonbill in action*



*Bhavnagar's Sand Lark at nest*



*Blackwinged Stilt about  
to settle on her eggs*



*A pair of Blackwinged Stilts*







*Black Drongo at nest*

*Blackwinged Kite guarding nestlings*







*Hen Bonelli's Eagle at nest with nestling*

*A pair of Bonelli's Eagles at nest on crag*







*Hen Great Indian Bustard settling on her egg*

*Cock Great Indian Bustard in his natural habitat*

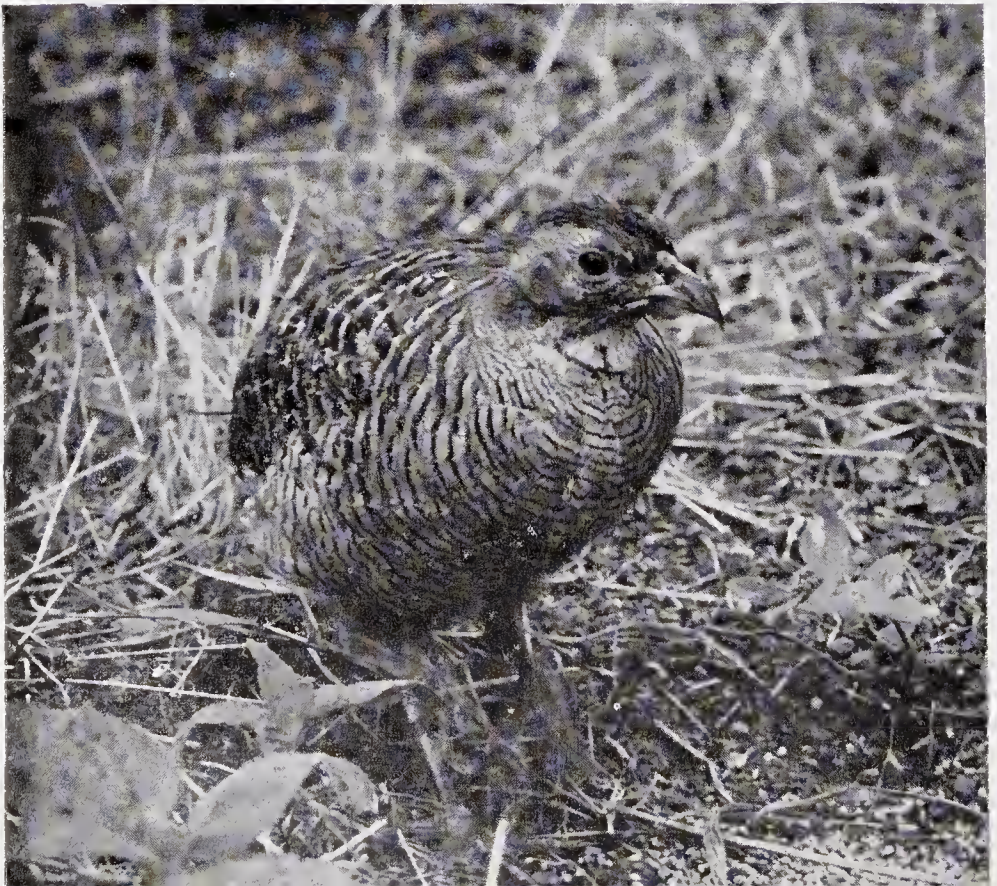






*Pair of House Crows at nest*

*Grey Partridge on grassland*







*A bird bath in forest*

*Hen Kentish Plover at nest*







*Cinereous Vulture in flight*



*Large White Egret rising*

of a hide, but will come and go without a second glance at the unusual structure. They are, like all birds, least nervous after their eggs have hatched, but even when incubation has progressed, there is not much risk of frightening the birds if the hide is constructed piece by piece over a couple of days and no more than a metre from the nest. Juvenile Drongos have a white spot near the gape and in winter the birds have a greyish belly.

We do not know the exact reason why Black Drongos collect for roosting at a particular place, but we have observed them doing so. At dusk they assemble on bare branches from which they hawk insects. We have seen them sitting around on dusty roads for a dust bath before flying to roost for the night.

They are attracted by fires which cause insects to be flushed.

Drongos are one of the cultivator's greatest allies in his constant struggle against destructive insects and no farmer of any worth would ever think of harming them.

## BLACKWINGED KITE

**A**MONG OUR SMALL resident raptorial, this species is no doubt one of the daintiest. The silver-grey upper plumage and wings, whitish head and lower plumage, the deep velvet-black shoulder patches, deep orange eyes and legs, make this a handsome hawk. The wings are longish and in flight held in a wide 'V' above the back. The black tips to the wings and short white stubby tail are characteristic. The Blackwinged Kite will often be seen hovering as if suspended in the air, scanning the ground for prey. As only two hawks of about the same size hover in our plains it is easy to identify the Blackwinged Kite from the Kestrel which has the upper parts reddish brown and the lower parts buff and streaked with brown. In flight the Blackwinged Kite is deceptively slow and buoyant and it often glides and soars in circles turning quite abruptly and winging away in search of food. This dainty hawk preys on insects, grasshoppers, beetles, small rodents and reptiles which it seizes by descending from a hovering flight, or from a high perch. It is a bird of open country, keeping close to cultivation and scrub interspersed with grassy downs. It is a local migrant and nests in small and large trees. It is crepuscular and will frequently be seen flying at dusk and in the early morning or late evening retiring to some shady tree during the heat of the day, or to roost at night.

It breeds at about all times of the year. The nest of this kite can be located near the place where they indulge in much aerial acrobatics, uttering a



series of harsh calls. The nest is built of sticks placed usually at the very top of a tree.

The eggs are handsomely bright, a reddish brown to an orange-brown colour, with a lighter ground. Both sexes incubate. The young when hatched are covered with a white down and look like cotton balls.

The large amount of insects and rodents destroyed by this bird make it invaluable as destroyer of agricultural pests and as such the Blackwinged Kite is a good friend of the farmer.

The Blackwinged Kite is often seen being harassed by house crows when nesting and it is with difficulty that they succeed in rearing their young. Fledglings often having left the nest follow their parents for some time, whistling and calling incessantly when hungry and waving their tails up and down. The owlsh features of the head of this species is apparent when seen at close quarters. In habits, we found, it resembled the Kestrel and the Harrier and quite unlike a kite, it does not scavenge but falls almost vertically on some live prey like a dart, wing pointing backwards and legs outstretched in front ready for action as it swiftly drops to the ground.

## BLACKWINGED STILT

**T**HIS IS A RESIDENT species found practically throughout India. It also has a wide distribution outside the country. The bird is a local migrant, breeding where conditions are suitable to it. In its selection of nesting sites it has a wide choice. We have found birds nesting either singly or in colony on lakesides, near salt pans, in swamps and on islets. During the breeding season the birds are noisy, emitting a rather monotonous alarm call when disturbed. The breeding season commences from April and lasts till August. Sometimes, five to six eggs are laid, though the normal clutch is four. The eggs resemble those of the Redwattled Lapwing.

The Blackwinged Stilt has a peculiar gait when approaching its nest. It walks forward and sideways and zigzag towards its nest, often crossing its legs while doing so. When settling, it sometimes falls over its eggs, shuffles its long legs clumsily and for a few moments appears extremely uncomfortable. When flushed from the nest the sitting bird flies straight up without much difficulty. This is strange because normally a bird when disturbed stands up and walks away quietly from the nest before taking wing. The parent birds sometime feign injury and call incessantly to divert attention and are very clever in enticing animal predators away from their eggs.

Both the sexes incubate and moisten the eggs during the hot hours. The nest may consist of pebbles or aquatic plants and may be raised a few inches

from the ground. In others it may only be a scrape-nest in the sand or a mere depression in the ground with very little lining. During winter the birds assume dark upper head and nape and gather in small and large flocks at the waterside. The Stilt is a confiding bird allowing close approach and not difficult to photograph either at the nest or away from it.

Usually the sexes can be told apart, the male having dark metallic green on its wings and upper parts. The birds feed in shallow water dipping their heads now and then and often bobbing their bodies at the same time. They also feed by left and right sweeps of the bill. None can mistake the Blackwinged Stilt for any other wader owing to its characteristic features and call. It is found everywhere in small streams, marshes, lakesides, riversides and on the sea-coast during the winter.

## BLUE ROCK-PIGEON

**T**HE BLUE ROCK-PIGEON, also known as the House Pigeon, needs no description. It is found throughout the country. This pigeon breeds in all kinds of places, and requires a small ledge for building its nest of sticks. In forest, mountain and coastal areas, the birds nest in cavities, on cliffs and banks. In the plains, they nest mostly in wells and inside houses and buildings. In all human habitations they become a thorough nuisance to the occupants.

The Blue Rock-Pigeon is a handsome bird; the metallic colours of its neck, when seen in sunlight, are particularly attractive. The green and purple colours shine lustrously as the cock pigeon inflates its neck and struts in front of the hen. The courtship of the male is attractive, for he inflates his neck and, bowing repeatedly, coos *What-what you are*, often turning in a circle one way and then the other. Spreading slightly his tail and wing quills, he moves forward a few steps dragging the tip of his tail while doing so. If the female approves of his flirtation, she may remain still; if not, she flies away resenting the intrusion, with the wooer often following behind. After the birds have selected their partners they indulge in billing and regurgitating milk to one another.

The nest-site is usually selected by the male who sits in it, flicking his wings and calling in a low voice, after which both birds commence to build. Two white eggs are laid. The young are pale yellow, turning grey as they grow older. They are fed with predigested food in the form of milk which is regurgitated to them by both parents. The squabs squeak and pester their parents until they can fend for themselves. They are constantly open to the danger of being killed by cats and large birds of prey on leaving the nest.

The Blue Rock-Pigeon readily breeds with other domestic pigeons close to human habitation with the result that many of them are hybrids, having different patterns and colours. The true Rock-Pigeon has no white on the rump and is ashy grey with two black bars on the wing coverts. In flight the Blue Rock-Pigeon is fairly fast and can travel long distances in search of food. Normally the birds gather in flocks and fly in circles. The bird is easily frightened and any large bird of prey flying above it or closeby may cause it alarm and make it fly, even though the danger may not be serious. When not intimidated, the pigeons fly off from their perch with a clap of their wings and sail into the air with wings held in a 'V' shape, flapping slowly and gliding intermittently, after which they may circle round and return to their perch. The sound made by a pigeon it takes wing is reminiscent of a newspaper being beaten on a hard substance.

Blue Rock-Pigeons are commonly fed by some people and large flocks may be seen settled or feeding on the ground. The birds also perch on statues and dirty them. One unusual sight is to see these pigeons perched on telegraph wires in small towns. This bird is considered to be harmful to grain which is left open, but it does thrive much upon natural seeds, eating with it grit to help in digestion. It is no doubt harmful to gram and certain leguminous crops. It also eats shoots of green vegetation and newly sown seed.

## BONELLI'S EAGLE

**L**IKE THE TAWNY EAGLE the Bonelli's is a resident eagle, found almost throughout India. Slender in build it is one of the most active of our eagles. This eagle is also known as the Slender Hawk-Eagle. Its eyes are golden yellow, like those of a hawk, but in juvenile birds they are brown. The species is easily recognised from its off-white lower parts and the white markings on the back. The upper parts are amber-brown with a greyish tinge on the feathers. The breast is streaked with dark blackish brown. The legs are feathered to the toes. The tail is barred and is flecked with grey, brown, and white, with a subterminal band to it. It is a handsome eagle and a bold one, attacking birds as large as peahens. It is known to capture its own prey and also to rob smaller raptors of their prey.

Usually, these eagles are seen in pairs, keeping together while hunting. When pursuing its prey, the Bonelli's Eagle displays quick wing strokes and is fairly fast, while at other times it may be seen soaring slowly with wings and tail spread. This species is found in all types of country, preferring areas where food is plentiful. The breeding season commences in



October and continues to March or April, some birds nesting in May and June in the Himalayas. We have found eggs mostly from December to February. The nest is built on cliffs or in trees and is quite a large structure, made of sticks and branches and lined with leaves. Two eggs form a normal clutch. They are white, some being marked with brown or grey. Both sexes help in building the nest and rearing the young but the female alone incubates. The male bird is slightly smaller in size than the female. Juvenile birds are brown above and rufescent below. The eyes are brown and remain so at least till the following year if not more.

In the middle of February, we received news that the eggs of a Bonelli's Eagle nesting on a cliff face had hatched. We, therefore, hastened to reach the place. The eyrie was well-known to us. One had to climb a steep side of a hill to approach the nest, it being in a cavity in a crag. The nest could not be seen from under the crag nor from directly above, though one could with difficulty climb on to a ledge close above and look down on it. This meant that there was no place from which to take photographs except from a small projecting flat rock on the side and slightly above the nest from where one could barely see a part of the nest. This small space was just sufficient for our hide to be set up and seemed ideal. Knowing that the pair of eagles would give more attention to their two young in the first week of hatching than at a later period, we had the hide placed immediately and, not intending to delay photographing the birds at the nest, we entered the hide the next morning. The nest was facing north, and we knew that the February sun would not strike any part of the nest except in the early morning for about half an hour and that too only on one side. This seemed useless for taking the eagles in colour. As we had no flash equipment at the time, taking pictures in colour was out of the question so we had to be contented with monochromes.

In the early morning the nestlings were kept warm by the mother, the cock sitting on some outcropping rock further up the hillside. The hen would after some time gracefully dive into the wind with wings spread, and sail out into the valley below. Soon the cock would join and both birds would be soaring in front and above the nest in wide circles. It is extraordinary how quickly the eagles could rise into the sky without flapping their wings, making full use of the thermal air currents. The nest was a square platform almost flat, made of branches of trees and bushes and lined with leaves. The white downy chicks lay in the centre of the nest, one of which was slightly larger. Throughout the day, the hen came to the nest for feeding the young and to guard them, covering them with her body when she felt it was necessary. The cock often brought the food, and passed it to the hen. We also saw him bring small branches covered with green leaves to the nest and place them on the side. At a later stage, both parents kept away from the nest for longer intervals and it was a bit tiresome to wait for them to return. During the time we were in the hide, we witnessed the eagles hunting. They would fly well apart, yet in a way together, gliding not very high, one above the other, scouring the hillsides.

Then if some bird, a pigeon or roller, were to fly within range, both the birds would dive at it one after the other. Failing such an attempt, both eagles would pursue their prey with rapid wing beats until the unfortunate creature took refuge in some bush or tree.

The dive of the Bonelli's Eagle is sometimes almost vertical if the prey is directly below, with the wings kept half closed. Often the bird swings from side to side and then circles before making the final assault on its prey. The assault is with wings held back and legs extended; in most cases the prey is caught in the talons but at times it is struck down. We found that a hare was an easy game unless it was missed by both birds or when it ran out of sight into some thick cover. The eagles have the habit of pursuing their quarry relentlessly until it is caught or takes cover and escapes.

The intense fear which these eagles create in their prey seemed to us to be a decisive factor in enabling them to capture it. A Painted Francolin being pursued by the eagle could on one occasion be seen sitting and gasping, paralysed by fear, making no attempt to escape. The result was that it was caught and killed. Another method by which the eagles hunt game birds and hares is by one eagle flying low over the ground almost beating the bushes and grass with its wings. No sooner a bird is flushed than the mate which is gliding high above drops down and commences the chase.

One morning as we reached the hide and looked over into the nest, we saw only one nestling ; then suddenly our eyes turned upon the other which was hanging limp on a branch projecting below the nest. It was dead. How this nestling became fixed on the branch was a wonder. If it had fallen out, it would have dropped directly below the cliff. But to have been caught in the branch of a small tree about two metres away from the site of the nest and below it was a puzzle. After thinking about the different ways in which it could have been thrown out, we came to the conclusion that perhaps the nestling had been caught in the talons of the parent bird while she was suddenly in the act of leaving the nest. Such a mistake could happen. In another nest of these eagles we had seen two eggs, one of which was broken and yet the parent bird brooded both the eggs. Presumably the egg was broken accidentally as the parent bird flew out of the nest. Stuart Baker mentions that birds of prey are wont to break their eggs with their beaks when frightened out of their nests.

This is surprising, because the Bonelli's Eagle is a careful bird. The hen would often alight on her nest and stand for half an hour or more, preening her feathers, drowsily closing her eye-lids while doing so. This preening was a daily affair, every feather being inspected, oiled and cleaned, even the crown feathers would be rubbed on her back. It was interesting to see how meticulously the bird cared for its body and feathers. It is also very careful while striking its prey on the ground, keeping its wings well back and its legs extended forward.

Once we saw an interesting scene when the hen Bonelli's Eagle was hunting right in front of our hide. We saw her dropping down from a great height to catch a blue rock-pigeon which had strayed from its flock and was flying lazily. Then suddenly we heard the eagle give out a terrific scream. A moment later we saw her neck extended and she was looking behind her. Our eyes looked in that direction and we saw a large brown eagle zooming down from the sky. In the meanwhile, the mate of the nesting eagle had heard the hen bird's cry for help and was coming towards her from a distance. The hen, carrying the weight of the pigeon, was not able to make much progress, while the attacking eagle was hurtling down upon her. In a few seconds, the newcomer was above her and was spiralling downwards to attack. The hen tried to change direction to allow time for her mate to come to her help. Meanwhile, the enemy had reached her and was making his fatal dive. The hen Bonelli's, realising that she was at the mercy of the big eagle, dropped her prey, emitting a shrill cry. The attacking eagle dropped down upon the dead pigeon which had struck the ground. In the meanwhile, the cock Bonelli's had arrived on the scene. He had seen the whole drama, but made no attempt to attack the enemy, who was busy plucking and tearing at its illegitimate booty. The two Bonelli's settled on two nearby rocks and watched their prey being eaten by the enemy whom we recognised to be an Imperial Eagle. We had expected both the eagles to make a joint attack on the robber but this they did not do. We left the scene wondering why the Bonelli's pair did not make an attempt to attack the Imperial Eagle. The two of them together would have been enough to drive the robber away.

## BROWN CRAKE

**T**HIS LITTLE BROWN WATERHEN is as secretive as it is confiding.

We first saw it near a reed bed bordering a sacred pool at a Hindu shrine. We were quite excited as we had not seen this bird elsewhere and it was so unexpected an encounter. While we were standing feeding the fish in the holy pool, we saw the bird at close quarters. The Brown Crake made its appearance as if from behind the curtains of a stage, as it stepped out from a thick reed bed where some Great Reed Warblers were proclaiming their presence. It quickly darted across to where we had fed the fish, as if to say "where is my share?" It, however, did not stand on ceremony and eagerly commenced to feed on the food that had drifted from where the fish were fed to the edge of the pool. The bird was a dark olive brown with a whitish grey throat and bluish grey breast, the bill tipped pale green and the legs were a dark plumbeous red which conveyed that it was in its breeding outfit. The tail jerked as it stood and walked and was kept erect also. Although shy the bird seemed aware that we were



not its enemies. It did, however, once or twice, take cover in the reeds, but quickly afterwards came out to help itself to some more food.

During our frequent visits to the temple pond, we also saw its mate, as sometimes the couple would come out together to look for food near the fish pond. Once or twice, some House Crows also came to pick up the drifting food at the water's edge and drove the Brown Crakes away.

Since our first observation of this active though skulking reed-loving bird, we saw it frequently and always close to reed beds. The bird is of a retiring nature when the sun is up. We have seen it in the early morning running rapidly on tip-toes, pausing now and then on the footpaths leading towards scrub and fields or towards another reed patch. Rarely have we seen it fly, but it does so to enter trees and rushes close to water.

When we first saw the Brown Crake we thought it was a Moorhen, but its slender build and almost uniform colour immediately disclosed its identity. Nevertheless, we saw some resemblance of the Crake to the Whitebreasted Waterhen in its habit and behaviour. The call of the Brown Crake is the shrill cry reminiscent of the Little Grebe.

This seclusive water bird is found in many parts of India and with the increase in irrigation tanks all over the country its habitat has become widespread and the number of these birds is no doubt on the increase. In areas of cultivation we have seen the bird enter crops close to its habitat and return to its haunts at daybreak. Being crepuscular we have suspected it of being nocturnal in its feeding habits at least to some extent. And yet, we have seen the bird feeding during the afternoons, specially on cloudy or rainy days. Agile in its movements, it does not fall an easy prey to predators.

## COMMON BABBLER

**B**ABBLERS ARE UBIQUITOUS and familiar to plains dwellers in India. Of these birds, the noisy Seven Sisters or Jungle Babblers are quite common and are often seen among fallen leaves in small parties of half a dozen birds or more. The babblers found close to human habitation in better wooded country are the Jungle Babblers, while the lighter coloured large Grey Babblers inhabit drier country. Both birds are about the size of the Common Myna.

Closely allied, but smaller in size, is the Common Babbler, a bird of grass, hedgerows and scrub. In general colour, the Common Babbler is pale olive-brown to greyish buff and has dark streaks, which are conspicuous on the upper parts; the tail is long and narrow and closely barred. The bird is noisy setting up a shrill whistling chatter while perched or while





*Hen Ashcrowned Finch-Lark feeding nestling*



*Bayas nest-building*





*Hen Koel on a mulberry bush*



*Drongo family at nest-site*





*Bhavnagar's Sandlark at nest*



*Blackbellied Tern at nest*





*Common Myna at bird-bath*



*Blackwinged Stilts—A pair on its feed*





*Blue Rock Pigeons in sunlight*



*Brown Crake caught unaware*



*Juvenile Imperial  
Eagle misses its  
prey*



*Grey Partridge  
trespassing in  
garden*



*Cock Common  
Indian  
Sandgrouse  
incubating*







*Indian Roller at his post*



*Indian Nightjar  
turning its eggs*

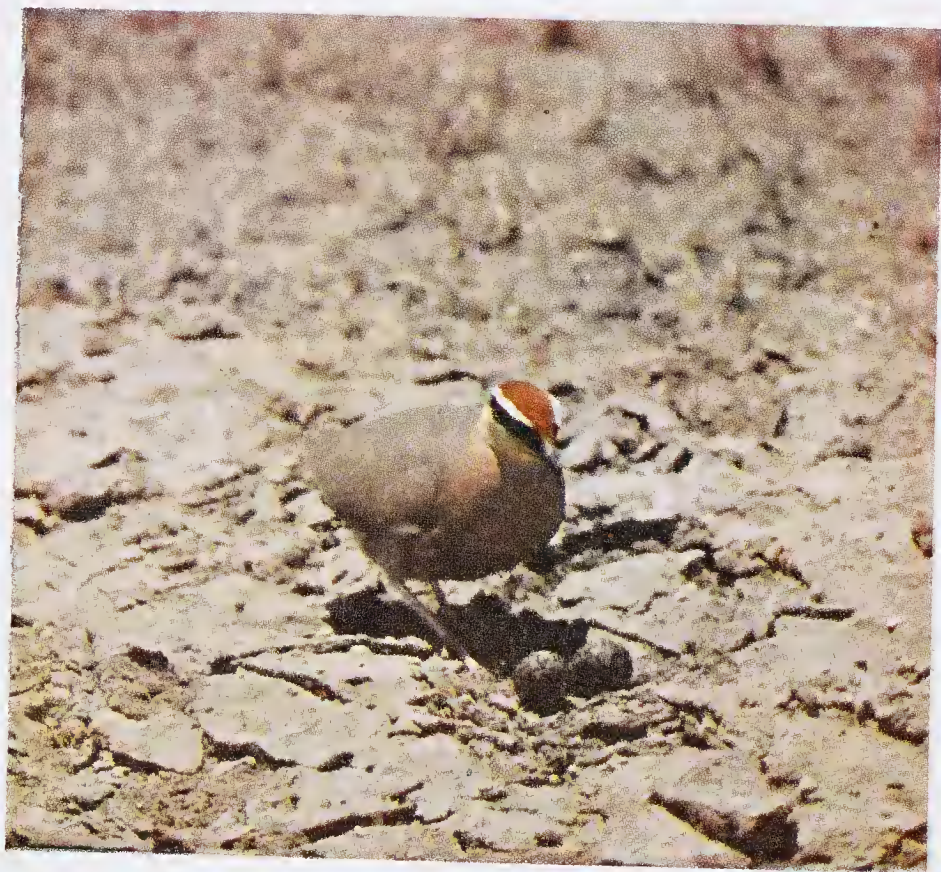


*Painted Partridge  
at nest*





*Peacock in display*



*Indian Courser approaching eggs*



flying in a 'follow my leader' fashion for cover when disturbed. Common Babblers are inveterate skulkers. In general they are found on the fringes of cultivation and semi-desert country where whole parties find shelter in the small tangled thorny bushes, and here they may be seen running like mice from one cover to another as if anticipating some aerial attack. They seem to have a constant fear of birds of prey and they are always ready to sound their alarm when one of their sentinels perched on a bush utters its sharp whistle after which the entire group immediately seeks cover and commences whistling agitatedly.

The Common Babbler breeds mostly during the rains, building a neat though large cup-shaped nest of fine sticks, roots and grass in a thick bush from almost ground level up to about three metres. Some four to six deep blue eggs are laid. The Common Babbler is parasitised by the migrant Pied Crested Cuckoo whose eggs are of the same colour but larger than those of the Babbler. Observation has shown us that the Babbler chicks are very often neglected by their parents in favour of that of the Cuckoo.

Babblers are mainly insectivorous in their diet. They add a little grain and fruit juice to their normal diet, but insects are their main food and as such they are invaluable allies in man's battle against the six-legged world.

## COMMON GREY PARTRIDGE

**T**HE COMMON GREY PARTRIDGE or Francolin is a well-known bird amongst sportsmen throughout India. It is the size of a pigeon and is recognised by a design of brown squares on the mantle and by the dark brown barring of the buffy grey lower parts. On the throat a U-shaped black line is visible when the bird is seen from close quarters. The plain greyish crown has a rufous tinge on the forehead. The legs are reddish and it is mainly the male who has spurs. The undertail coverts are yellowish ochre. The tail is rufous-brown tipped with black and is an easy feature for recognition when the bird is in flight. Both sexes are alike but the male is slightly larger and stronger.

The common call of the Grey Partridge is an oft repeated *pakdilio* which is familiar to the sportsmen and betrays the bird often to its doom. The partridge has other calls for other purposes. When being killed the bird emits a shrill death-cry. The Grey Partridge is a fighter and it is not uncommon to see them fighting in the early morning or evening. These fights are frequently irrespective of the breeding season and sometimes it so happens that two coveys will match each other in fight, the hen birds watching the performance or joining in to encourage their mates. The fighting trait in the Grey Partridge was much exploited in the past and regular fights were arranged by people who were keen to gamble on

them. Even now this is practised in certain parts of India. The large Hyderabad Partridge is a popular fighter.

Normally the Grey Partridge is monogamous and although pungacious he may be seen in coveys. He is much of a ground bird walking and running most of his time and taking to wing when suddenly frightened. It is found in all types of country except in the parched treeless dry desert area. It has a strong flight, rising with a whirr of the wings. For cover it likes hedges, grassland, bushes and thorny vegetation and is always ready to enter cultivation. It roosts on trees and shrubs. Its food consists of seeds, grain green food and insect life. Among insects it prefers those found in dung. For this reason the partridge was considered to be bad eating by some old sportsmen but there is no doubt that its white flesh is about the tastiest amongst all the game birds.

The breeding season varies in different parts of India; most birds breed from February to June. The eggs are small replicas of those of the domestic fowl, being slightly more pointed. About five to ten eggs are laid in a scrape-nest which is generally placed under some bush, rock or hedge and lined sometimes with grass or leaves. The hen bird incubates and sits close while the cock acts as the sentinel. Both sexes, however, look after the chicks taking great care of them. Yet the young are open to danger of being killed by birds of prey and ground predators. At one time in India the Grey Partridge afforded sport and falconers trained a variety of hawks to capture it. The partridge was popular because it provided both the hunter and his hawk with food.

The Grey Partridge is a popular cage bird and it is not unusual to see a pair of them being carried in a cage after having been reared at a young age. These trained partridge are allowed to leave the cage when they are tame enough to return to their cage when called. The partridge fanciers catch wild partridges by placing snares around the cage of a tamed partridge. The wild partridge on hearing the tame bird calling comes out from cover to attack it and is caught in the snares while doing so. The Common Grey Partridge is one of the hardiest game species in India and can tolerate big changes in temperature and humidity. It, however, tends to avoid heavily wet and thickly forested areas. Nor is it found at high altitudes but prefers moderately dry and warm climate. The partridge is no doubt a friend of the farmer as it consumes harmful insect life and feeds freely on termites, ants and beetles and their larva. It is not such an unmixed blessing either, because it also feeds on plant life and seeds.

## COMMON NIGHTJAR

**A** FAMILIAR SIGHT along a night drive is a dark, dumpy bird sitting on the road with red eyes glowing in the headlight, rising upon, long silent wings when the car is almost on it and, with an erratic flight



disappearing into the darkness. This bird is the Common Indian Nightjar, a bird living on insects of the night.

This bird is best observed during a quiet country walk at dusk. The presence of the bird is indicated by a soft, pleasing *tuk-tuk-tuk-tukrrr* not unlike the sound of a stone rebounding over ice or that of a table-tennis ball being bounced and trapped. The maker of the sound will be seated on the road, and if the person were to stand and listen the call will be repeated and answered by another bird from beyond the trees. And soon a silent flitting form will appear in the darkening sky on soundless wings to alight closely to the first caller. The only sound in flight is an occasional clap caused by the flight feather striking each other above the back. The failing light of dusk gives no clue to the real colouration of the bird but the white spots on the long wings are conspicuous, and the 'skidding stone-on-ice' call a sure identity.

The Common Nightjar has a wide range of habitats ; it is found in arid treeless country as well as in thick forests, gardens and fields. All the birds we photographed were found in open country, where finding the eggs is not so difficult. Two oval shaped eggs are laid on the ground without any attempt at nest making, and usually the site is in some bare patch right in the open. The salmon-pink coloured eggs have large blotches of deep colours and are indeed beautiful. While incubating the Nightjar will permit close approach, sitting motionless observing the intruder through half-closed eyes, and as the large eyes allow it to see behind the head as well as in front it does not need to turn its head. Any sudden motion close to the sitting bird will cause the bird to fly suddenly, only to settle some distance away. When the hide is set up near the nest, the returning bird will alight several yards away and then slowly walks towards the eggs with a curious wobbling gait. After settling on its eggs the bird literally falls asleep closing its eyes to mere slits through which it keeps a lookout. So motionless does it remain that it can be mistaken for a dead bird. We have, however, seen the bird yawn disclosing the deep fleshy-pink of the huge gape. Owing to its sluggishness, we have found the Nightjar to be one of the most unrewarding birds to photograph to incite some action from them we have been obliged to slowly work a stick out from below the hide to poke the bird off the eggs, causing the bird to spread its wings and tail in an aggressive pose and show off its plumage.

During the courtship flight the Nightjar emits a bubbling note, like a *ba-ba* repeated often. This is accompanied by a gliding flight. The breeding season is a long one commencing in February and ending in October. Nightjars often nest in the same patch of ground each year if undisturbed. The birds always prefer well-drained ground for their nest sites. It takes about twelve to fourteen days for the eggs to hatch. The sexes are very much alike except that the male has the outer tail feathers whitish. The Nightjar does perch on low branches or walls.

Another species found in scrub and forest is the Franklin's Nightjar, recognised by its call of *Chwiss-Chwiss* like the lash of a whip, which it

utters in flight and while displaying. Another common species found in forests is the Jungle Nightjar, which is recognised by its call of *chook-chook*, the sound of a flour engine working at a distance.

## COMMON SANDGROUSE

**A**BOUT THE SIZE of the Ring Dove, the Common Sandgrouse has a wide distribution throughout India. It is however, not found in dense forests or at high altitudes, as it is a bird of the open country and desert land. This species is found in wasteland, ploughed fields, vegetable crops, stony hills, desert areas and in scrub. It is either seen in flocks or in pairs. The male Common Sandgrouse is identified by its ochre-brown upper plumage and breast on which there is a black girdle, an ashy grey tinge on the head, the dark chocolate abdomen, the white edges to the brown wings and the two long tapering feathers of the tail. The female differs in being spotted on the breast, and almost barred on the upper parts; the tail is distinctly so, and is shorter than in the male. In both sexes the call is clear, and from this the species can be easily recognised. It is something like *why attack* quickly repeated. This call is normally heard when the bird is in flight or when the birds have been flushed and are on the wing.

The Common Indian Sandgrouse is a well-known game bird, and owing to its regular habit of coming to water for drinking morning and evening, sportsmen are often tempted to shoot it at such places. During a shoot one may see flocks of these birds flying in all directions and calling.

The Common Sandgrouse is a fast flier and is seldom caught by eagles or falcons. Although we have seen Peregrine Falcons preying upon it, it is rarely caught, since the bird can twist in the air with remarkable swiftness, thus often evading a fatal swoop by falcon or eagle.

The breeding time for Sandgrouse is throughout the year, many birds laying during the winter and hot weather months. At this time, the breeding birds separate from the flock and are found in pairs. Both sexes incubate and bring up the young. Two to three elliptical eggs are laid. They are yellowish to reddish brown in colour and are marked with grey and brownish markings.

It was in the month of May that we found a nest in a stony open ground. The Sandgrouse nests in diverse types of country from desert land to open glades, from ploughed fields to wastelands. The nest we had found was in a flat stony ground, with patches of short dry grass most of which had been overgrazed by cattle. Cattle dung was strewn over the place, but where the nest was, the ground was bare with one or two large stones close to it. The nest contained two eggs, and to say the least, they merged

beautifully with their background. The nest was merely a scrape made in the ground by the parent bird. We commenced our routine work of erecting the hide and leaving it for a day or two so as to get the birds used to a false lens and the hide. Evidently, the birds were hard set, and were disinclined to move even when the hide was brought close to the nest. When, however, the sitting bird was flushed it emitted a *wak-wak-wak-wak* as it fluttered off the nest and settled not very far away. This unusual behaviour of the bird gave us the impression that it was trying to distract us away from the nest and the eggs. Although we have seen the Sandgrouse feign injury in situations like this, our pair did no such thing. In the couple of days that we observed the pair, we were able to take some good photographs. The cock bird appeared to be the bolder of the two, though this is not always the case. At times, both birds were seen close to the nest. Even at such close quarters as three metres away, the camouflage of the sitting bird was perfect. Many a time while walking we have stumbled upon an entire flock of Sandgrouse which we were unable to discern earlier only to see them suddenly rise at our feet. The eggs are also a perfect example of blending colouration and it is only at certain angles when the light is shining on them that they can be easily seen. The sitting bird so long as it feels that it is being watched will not move for hours together. When flushed from the nest, it behaves cautiously, coming back to the nest in short deliberate steps, stopping every now and then. Although the ground was almost flat, the hide had been placed on the east side of the nest in order to get the sun in the best position for photographs. A morning westerly wind was blowing which appeared to be ideal to muffle any extra noise that may be made in the hide and to prevent the noise of the camera shutter being heard too loudly. Everything was set for a snap. The hen Sandgrouse after it had been flushed returned to the nest without much hesitation, walked on to the nest with its back to the camera. This was a bad angle to take a photograph from and though we hoped that the bird would turn round or sideways, it just brooded its eggs without turning. Every time the bird was flushed she behaved in the same manner and it became rather exasperating. The answer to the problem was to change the position of the hide. The Sandgrouse seemed to prefer brooding with their heads towards the wind and were camera shy. So we moved our hide slightly, without causing the birds any alarm and this gave us an excellent opportunity to snap the birds at the nest. In the early morning we could see both parents coming to the nest. And then one bird would fly away, and return after at least an hour or two. The day after we had taken the photographs of the birds on the nest, we found that the eggs had hatched, and the pair of Sandgrouse were not to be seen. The empty egg shells were lying close to the scrape. After searching for some time we found the pair and its young. The nidifugous chicks had walked away with their parents soon after they had been hatched. When we approached the pair of Sandgrouse, the birds walked away leaving the chicks in the short dry grass and stony ground. The chicks were speckled and striped with reddish-brown, and buffy-white. We left them as they were, retreating some distance away to watch the parents return to their young. This



they did, and then all of a sudden one bird flew away. This seemed strange, but soon we found the cock, after an interval of about fifteen minutes, returning to where the young were lying. Watching through binoculars, we noticed that the male had his breast and abdomen soaked in water. Then he walked up to the young and seemed to cover them. The chicks were seen to move upto the breast of the parent and fill. Evidently, the parent bird was giving the chicks a drink. This is the method by which some Sandgrouse offer water to their chicks.

From observations made in the field, we noticed that the Common Sandgrouse, when seen in pairs or singly, indicated that they were breeding or were about to breed. We have seen the cock bird select the nesting-site and make the scrape often nodding his head and enticing the hen to approve of the nest-site, a behaviour reminiscent of the House Pigeon. The hen bird also makes a scratching for what appears to be an indication of her approval. However we have seen two or three scrapes being made close to each other before the nest-site was selected not without some disagreement between the house-hunters.

When the chestnut-brown and white young are hatched and are still unable to fly, the parent bird leads them very slowly to protect them from eagles and other birds of prey. The chicks follow their parents even after they were fully fledged and it is a common sight to see a family of five or more Sandgrouse together.

Although the Sandgrouse is not always easy to spot even while it is flying. it is conspicuous when alighting owing to the dark feathers of its underwing. After alighting it seems to merge so well with its background that it is immediately lost sight of, and is only seen when it moves.

## COMMON MYNA

**A**S ITS NAME indicates, the Common Myna is found throughout India. Feeding largely upon insect pests which harm the crops, the Myna is regarded as a friend of the farmer. Taking advantage of this privilege, the Myna sometimes eats the grain in standing millet fields, following the example set by the Rosy Pastor, yet on the whole if the Myna can obtain insect food it will avoid feeding on grain. At the time of the breeding season, which commences normally in the middle of the long hot season and ends soon after the monsoon, the Myna destroys innumerable insects which appear soon after the rains break, and are a pest to vegetation ; not only that, the Myna does twice the work, as it feeds its young on insect food.

The Myna builds its nest of sticks and debris in some cavity or hole and lays from five to six pale or deep-blue eggs. Both sexes, which are

alike, incubate and take care of the young. They can be recognised when seen together as the male has more black on the head and neck. The birds often breed twice or thrice in the season. The nestlings begin crying out for food at an early stage. The noise which they make at their nest-sites often results in attracting cats, mongooses and birds of prey which feed on them. Although, the Mynas remove the faeces of the nestlings from the nest, the nest is generally dirty and often full of minute lice and bugs, and the smell more often than not invites snakes and monitor lizards to the nest resulting in the nestlings being devoured. Both parents, however, keep a vigilant guard over their nest, and if by chance, they see these enemies approaching it, they courageously make every attempt to attack and chase them away. Not always, however, do they succeed, and many a nestling is killed and eaten by a hungry predator. At the fledgling stage, it is the hawk such as the Shikra and the cat that takes its toll from the Mynas. We have seen a Common Pariah Kite swoop down and take away a fully fledged juvenile Myna, and though a flock of Mynas did everything they could to make the Kite release its prey, they could not succeed. Nesting Mynas can become a nuisance in the house, dirtying it and bringing all kinds of filth while building their nest. When the eggs are hatched, the nest becomes a constant chatter box, and a bed of evil smell. Excreta and left-over legs and wings of insects fed to the young fall below the nest. We have seen the Myna feeding the young with a great variety of food other than insects, such as house geckos, worms, scorpions, centipedes, spiders, frogs, tadpoles, and even young snakes. The advantage of having a pair of Mynas close to the house, apart from their usefulness in destroying insect life, is that they are good sentinels. Any snake that passes in front of them does not go unheeded, for the pair of Mynas will at once give vent to their warning calls of drawn-out harsh notes. So long as it is in sight, the Mynas will give it no peace. If the snake is clearly visible and slightly in the open, the Mynas will fly over it calling loudly and will make attempt to attack it, though hardly ever coming into contact. The warning notes of one Myna calls other Mynas to the scene, and a whole bunch of Mynas may gather, emitting their alarm. In fact, the cry is so well understood by other small birds that they also may gather, and start calling in their own way. The Mynas emit their warning notes also when they see other ground predators. When the breeding season is over, Mynas gather in flocks and it is not uncommon to see them gathered in large numbers. In flight, the Myna is easily recognised by the round white patch on the wings and when closely seen, the white edges to the tail feathers are conspicuous as the bird flies. When flushed, the Myna emits a shrill whistle.

During the breeding season, the Myna is heard singing more often than at other times. The song is not unmusical and the bird while singing nods its head, erecting the blackish crest, while giving it a melancholy look. Thus a pair of Mynas may often be seen while perched. As a warning signal against birds of prey the Myna emits a squeak. Sometimes, Mynas may be seen with their feet and claws interlocked, making a row

and as if fighting. The birds may face each other lying on the ground exhausted, often after being clasped in the air. At this time, the birds allow close approach as they are fully engrossed in this social play. The Common Myna becomes tame and confiding it offered food and we have seen labourers sharing their midday meal with Mynas which are almost out of their hands. We have ourselves fed Mynas with flourcakes and we have seen them take this food away to feed their young. The fledglings are sometimes kept as pets by the poor and though they do not talk much, they can copy whistles to please them, yet they can be taught to talk quite well.

Another species of myna, which is known as the Jungle Myna because it lives in forests, is often mistaken for the Common Myna. The Jungle Myna is distinguished by the absence of yellow skin round the eyes. Another Myna, common in certain areas, is the Bank Myna, which is smaller than the Common Myna and is recognised by its ashy-grey plumage, orange-red orbital skin, red bill and eyes, and the buff edges to the tail feathers.

## INDIAN PEAFOWL

EVERYONE IN INDIA is familiar with the peacock, its gorgeous plumage, its piercing cries, and its nuptial display. The Peacock is, no doubt, one of India's most beautiful birds and pride of the country. It is the country's National Bird. The Indian species is found only in India and Ceylon. There is a Burmese Peafowl which is found eastwards to Sumatra. And also the fairly recently discovered African Peafowl from the Belgian Congo.

So highly prized in the past was the Indian Peafowl that it was sent as gift to King Solomon from kings of India. Alexander took back the species to his own country. Eventually it reached Rome and from there to Britain.

Closely connected in legend with Lord Krishna, the peafowl is held sacred in many parts of India where it enjoys complete protection in contrast to other parts of the country where no law can protect it. Uncommon or rare where it is hunted, the peafowl is common or almost domesticated in places where it is considered sacred. Thus it enjoys a distinction which no other bird of the country gets. It inhabits open country mixed with cultivation and trees, a habitat in which, if it was persecuted, it would have been extinct long ago. In areas of forest land where it is hunted the bird has lost its ground, seeking refuge in dense patches of forest.

The peafowl is one of the most intelligent of birds ; confiding in man where he regards it in veneration, and shunning him where he treats it as his prey. The peafowl has remarkably good eyesight, and power of hearing and hence



it is not an easy bird to bag, even with the shotgun, once it is aware of danger. The peafowl is a good walker and runs well, flying only when necessary. The flight is strong and fast, once on the wing.

The Peacock in most parts of India assumes his colourful feathered train at the beginning of the hot weather and displays it during the hot season and the early monsoon, after which he sheds his feathers. Just before the break of the monsoon rains the Peacock is at his best, and one may see him strutting with his train fully open like a fan, waving his cinnamon-coloured wings at his sides and now and then emitting his ear-splitting shrieks. While he thus dances, he turns round slowly in all directions. The Peacock displays mostly during the early morning and in the evening but on cloudy days he may display at any time. He prefers to display with some background, such as a wall or a hedge, and in the shade, but one may see him displaying in some open patch in the forest or village yard. On the slightest of suspicion of danger, the train is lowered and he is all attention. We have seen Peacocks displaying on thick branches and roof tops.

The Peahen does not have the cinnamon wings and the long train. Her neck is tinged with metallic green and the flanks and abdomen buffy white. The head and the crest is rusty brown and is not so bright as in the cock. While the cock calls loudly, often stimulated by some loud noise, the hen is usually silent.

When displaying, the Peacock opens out his train which during the breeding season attracts the Peahens, and one by one they may be seen collecting round the displaying Peacock. Their presence close to the Peacock excites the latter, who, moving forward and quivering his train with a rustling sound, begins his courtship. So enamoured is he at the time, that he does not see anyone except his would-be mate, his train pressed forward by the tail, forming a concave shield of feathers which almost blocks his view except from the front. He remains in this position for a few seconds, continuing his dance with train spread. Those who have seen the Peacock in full display with his harem of Peahens around him can never forget the beauty of the scene.

The Peacock is polygamous and takes no interest in rearing its young. The Peahen, after mating seeks a secluded place to lay her eggs. The eggs are buffy-white. The hen lays four to eight eggs, the normal clutch being of five. The site for laying may vary, though most eggs are laid in long grass; the nest being merely a scrape or not even that. Old nests of vultures or storks may be used and Peahens may lay on flat tops of buildings or bowers. In forest areas the nest may be found in grass under bushes or amidst fallen leaves. The incubation period lasts about a month. The chicks are fawn and brown and when they grow, are much like their mother without her bright colours. The chicks emit a plaintive whistle and are able to fly at a young age, this being useful for them in roosting on branches with their mother.

Young Peafowls are much preyed upon by wild cats and birds of prey, and even the Peahen falls a prey to jungle cats and leopards when incubating

her eggs. We have also seen Peafowl having been killed by eagles and leopards. When alarmed the Peahen sometimes emits a drum like sound and raises her neck feathers. Fully fledged Peafowl chicks utter a honk.

The Peacock has spurs on his legs which are used for fighting. Some Peahens have spurs too. Two Peacocks may be seen sparring at each other walking in a circle, stopping now and then as if to pick up something from the ground. Then one of them may suddenly turn round and become aggressive and then both simultaneously may box each other flying up into the air facing each other. The fighting is not as heated as a cock fight, but it may resume the next day until one of the birds feels he is defeated and starts running with outstretched neck with the winner chasing him. Peafowl, when together, are a nuisance to farmers as they eat vegetable shoots and a certain amount of grain. They also eat small snakes, centipedes, scorpions, and insect life.

Peafowl are cautious while walking through forest and they wind their way past trees much like a panther, stopping to listen and turning their course when suspicious of danger. Seldom do they give vent to a call when fleeing except when they are flushed or suddenly alarmed. When flushed they emit a series of calls like *cock-cock-cock-cock*, and when alarmed utter a warning note *thank* or *thank you* which may be repeated at intervals. Juvenile Peacocks do not grow a long train but their necks assume a greenish-blue colour, the full nuptial plumage being developed in about the third year. Till then, although they display themselves and attract hens of their age, they do not breed, and are driven away by the older birds. The young males can always be recognised by their cinnamon-coloured wings and barred scapulars and inner secondaries.

The peafowl is tame when close to village life where it is held sacred, but in the open grassland and forest areas, it is wary. We found by experience that taking photographs of the Peahen at her nest was not as easy as we had imagined. We had found a nest in scrub quite some distance from any habitation, with five eggs in it. The place seemed ideal for photography and so we erected the hide not more than 20 metres away, and step by step we brought it closer in the usual manner. This procedure, no doubt, caused suspicion to the Peahen. It was with much difficulty that we were able to take a few pictures of the hen at the nest, and that, too, after sitting for many hours in the hide. The slightest camera click would startle the bird, but once settled she would press her head downwards and crouch.

Peacocks lose their train during and after heavy rains, and feathers are picked up by villagers who collect them for making brooms for sweeping the floor. Beautiful fans are also made out of them. In old days, discarded wing quills were made use of as pen-holders and even as pens before nibs came into use. In India one may see diverse types of ornaments and articles made in the shape of the Peacock. The Peacock is one of the shape of the Peacock known as the "Tawus" (which means Peacock in Persian) was invented. The once famous 'Peacock Throne' studded with

precious jewels was a splendid piece of art. The Peacock feathers are often used as headgear in folk dances; Lord Krishna is believed to have worn one.

## CRIMSONBREASTED BARBET OR COPPERSMITH

THE CONTINUOUS *took took* like the dull whistle of a distant flour mill pump at work, can hardly be imagined to be made by a small bird of the size of a sparrow. Yet it is true, and the sound is produced by a bird which usually is perched on top of a tree or amidst the foliage of a green-leaved tree. Perhaps the side-to-side movement of the head as the bird calls first attracts the attention of the gazing eyes looking in the direction of the sound. The upright posture of the singing bird soon comes into view and, if the light is favourable, the two bright crimson spots, one on the forehead and the other on the breast of the bird, may also be seen.

The bird when seen closely is colourful and bright but when it is amidst green-foliaged trees it is less easily discerned. When the Banyan tree is in fruit the crimson spots of the bird mix with the red fruit of the tree and the bird then merges with its background. The Fig tree is its favourite—the bird obtains much of its food from this tree, and where these trees abound the Copper-smith is generally found. It is a fairly common bird in the country, and owing to its *took* call the Indians call it '*Tooktookiya*'.

In the breeding season, which may commence from February till the rains break, the bird is quite conspicuous. It makes a nest-hole in a stump or rotten branch of a tree usually on the lower side with a spherical entrance about the size of a rupee which leads downwards to a nest-chamber where the round white eggs are laid. Every year a new nest-hole is made close to the old one, and we have seen some made in a vertical row below each other. The cock bird more often than not selects the nest-site.

Both sexes take care of the young but the female does most of the incubation. The cock bird is pugnacious in his nesting territory and we have seen him fight and chase away rivals. His courtship display when in flight is peculiar in that it consists of fluttering of wings and quivering them while rising up in the air. When the young have hatched, the parents feed them on fruits but we have seen them catch insects and their larvae. When searching for insect-food, we have seen birds moving from branch to branch stiffly flipping their wings, opening and closing them, trying to flush bark insects or those hiding in dry branches or under leaves. Thus, we have seen them in leafless teak and other trees seeking food and alighting on the ground to pick up some live food. We have seen their bills crammed with crushed fruit of *Ficus* trees or with insects as they came to feed their nestlings. We have seen a bird removing ants which were attempting to swarm into its



nest-hole in which there were young and we have seen ants enter these holes when a nestling had died or had been killed by them. A normal batch of fledglings consists of three. They are dull replicas of their parents, as they have no crimson-red spots.

Once the breeding is over, we have seen squirrels, tree mice and Yellowthroated Sparrows occupy the Coppersmith's nest-holes. We have seen Brahminy Mynas attempting to enter these nests but in vain. Sometimes, striped squirrels and mice succeed in occupying the nest-hole before the barbets have decided to re-nest, but once they have started in earnest, the birds keep intruders out by remaining close to the hole. It is not unusual for barbets to roost in their holes after the breeding season is over. Nesting may take place where the birds are resident and we have seen nests in the centre of cities and towns where large trees have stood for many long years and in the vicinity of the Ficus trees. The bird is shy but soon gets used to the noise and hubbub of urban life. The ins and outs of the birds at a nest-hole are rather well timed when one is not looking and not too near. The parent bird flies and hops from one branch to another getting closer to the entrance hole with food in its bill, then clings to the side of the hole where the fledglings soon come up and are promptly fed, after which the bird quickly flies away. In the case of nestlings the parent bird enters inside the hole to feed them. The process takes but little time, no doors to open or shut when entering and going out. Food is often brought from a distance and the birds fly in a direct manner quite rapidly. When near the nest-tree they seem to be quite cautious before attempting to enter their nest-holes.

The young start chattering as soon as they start growing up and remain quite close to the entrance anticipating food from their parents. Being shy, they retire down into the chamber after being fed. The birds are on the whole silent except for their *took took* call which may be heard at odd times of the year, particularly during the hot post-monsoon sultry weather.

## CROW-PHEASANT OR COUCAL

**T**HIS BIRD IS neither a crow nor a pheasant but belongs to the cuckoo family, though in no way can it be considered parasitic. Donning a dress of inky black with shades of purple-blue and green, it has a long black tail and chestnut coloured wings almost like the quills of the peacock, but darker. However, its resemblance to a Koel is marked by its blood-red eyes. The sexes are alike. In habits, this bird is closer to the Sirkeer Cuckoo being a skulker and seeking its food mostly on the ground and from low bushes. The Coucal has a notorious reputation as a nest-thief and while it may devour eggs and young of ground nesting birds and those nesting in shrubs, it does not, like the Treepie, systematically rob nests.

We found the Crow-Pheasant quite a useful bird, destroying beetles, small snakes, scorpions, spiders, centipedes, grasshoppers, locusts, mice, lizards and numerous insects and their larvae. Most of its hunting is done on foot, making use of its broad wings and long tail to flush animal life lying concealed in the grass. It seems, however, to enjoy hunting lizards and geckos most. We once came upon a bird which was suddenly attacked by a Grey Partridge repeatedly; evidently the bird had strayed too close to the Partridge with eggs or young. Yet, we feel that the aggressive looking Coucal is not really a threat to ground nesting birds of equal size since they are capable of defending their eggs and young. It is birds like Purple Sunbirds, Longtailed Warblers, Tailor Birds, Quails and other small birds who may suffer from a ruffian like Coucal. Some nests which were broken and pulled down did seem to us the work of this slow-moving bird. The Coucal walks like a great bully or wrestler ready to challenge any feathered contestant he meets, but actually he is quite cowardly seeking the nearest cover when danger threatens.

In the breeding season, Coucals will call *coop coop* or *hook hook* continuously, puffing out their necks. They also emit a hissing sound like the sound produced by air escaping from a tyre. It was in August during the monsoon rains that we found a nest of this bird. It was round like a football and had a round, window-like entrance on one side. There were two dull white creamy eggs in the nest which was made of twigs and leaves and lined with green leaves. This nest was built in a tree on which creepers had covered almost the whole of the crown. In this entwinement was the well-concealed nest of the Coucal. We had watched the process of nest-building, the bird taking large leaves off a mango tree and flying from tree to tree before alighting at the low branch of the nest-tree and then climbing up to the unfinished nest. The whole process looked to us something like a bucket-potatoe race, though there seemed to be no hurry about it and the stations the Coucal made on the way reminded us of a narrow gauge railway train stopping at small stations before reaching the terminus.

By the time the eggs had hatched, our *machan*\* was ready and we commenced to take pictures when the nestlings were big enough to peep out of the window of their nest. Both parents brought food, mostly locust and grasshopper and their larvae but we saw centipedes, beetles, mantises, stick-insects, lizards, earthworms, young snakes and winged insects like the leaf-insect or katydid. The wings of insects had been removed before they were fed to the nestlings. The new hairlike feathers of the nestlings gave us a vivid impression of the quills of a porcupine. The feeding was done regularly though suspiciously but we were able to get some pictures of the parent bird at the nest. As we watched the daily proceedings of the Coucal family from the *machan*, we were obliged to get wet owing to continuous showers of rain which broke through the clouds. But one day, heavy rain was preceded by gusty winds which tore the nest of the Coucals down in spite of the seemingly firm manner in which it was placed. This calamity ended our camera-work with the Coucal.

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\*Elevated platform

## FLAMINGO

ORNITHOLOGISTS HAVE FOUND it difficult to classify this extraordinary bird. Though placed close to the storks, its features and ways are more like those of the waterfowl. The long snake-like 'S' shaped neck, the parrot-like head, the Roman-nose like bill, the long stilted legs with webbed toes and a comparatively small coconut-shaped body make the bird look like a fantastic fabricated toy. It obtains its food by straining mud of its minute animal and plant life with its thick downward curved bill. The tongue is used as a pump to suck and eject the semi-liquid while straining food. The bill equipment is such as to be used upside-down, the head being held down and the curved bill plough the ooze in almost serpentine manner.

The Flamingo can swim and when it does so, it looks like a Swan. A flock of Flamingoes of the larger kind, look rosy white, but when they fly, they reveal a bright scarlet-pink bordered by black in the wings. When flying, the shortness of Flamingo's wings is noticeable, and it is only a rapid wing beat that keeps the bird aloft. The take-off of a Flamingo flock is an impressive sight. Some birds before doing so, flap their wings as if to test whether they are in good working order ; then, as if by command of a leader, the whole flock turns towards the wind and with a short run—the legs pattering the surface of the water, wings beating rapidly they are airborne. As they turn and circle against the mid-day sun, they appear like a storm of pink-winged locusts. We have seen them skimming over the waves of the sea, hugging the coastline, following the shores of lakes and estuaries, crossing gulfs, creeks, and mud flats.

Flamingoes scatter while feeding but they quickly close their ranks when about to fly or move in a particular direction. Each Flamingo is aware of its position in the group and we see order in its movement. A flock of Flamingoes marching along the shore is like a regiment, heads held high, the body though horizontal is tightly pressed and the pink legs walk in measured steps. There is always a leader assessing the situation, but this spectacle is somewhat marred by the constant noise amidst the troops, as the *gonk-gonk* made by the birds betray an undecisive uneasiness except when feeding. Nevertheless, when the whole community is about to fly they all become silent and motionless, their heads up, all looking in one direction as if waiting for the word 'go' from the leader.

Their threading in and out and turning in circles while feeding reminded us of some Indian folk dance. Yet we have seen Flamingoes break their legs when getting caught in some limestone cavity below the surface of the mud. They also stamp the mud or water bottom to bring up food. This often draws other birds to scavenge near the Flamingoes.

The Large Flamingoes breed in India in the Great Rann of Kutch in a great mass, consisting of several lakhs of birds. One elongated white



egg is laid on a mud mound made by the birds by scooping mud with their bills. Their nesting depends a great deal upon the water level of the Rann at the breeding site and its vicinity. The breeding colony is known as 'Flamingo City'. Flamingo chicks are smoky-grey and do not have curved bills at hatching time but they are almost straight ; their legs are fleshy turning grey as they grow. The success of a Flamingo breeding colony depends upon the water level and seclusion from disturbance. In years of floods, Rosy Pelicans have bred near the 'Flamingo City' and Avocets are known to breed not far away quite regularly. The Lesser Flamingo also breeds in the Rann.

Watching winter Flamingoes in salt compartments in the Rann has been a constant joy for us and with them we have seen countless land, sea, and shore birds. Such places are a veritable Mecca for bird-watchers. Large number of migratory birds arrive in September and leave in March. The diverse variety of shore birds seen at such places is at times incredible.

Flamingoes of both species are found on our shores at any time of the year when they are not nesting, the larger species visiting inland *jheels*\* and lakes frequently. At breeding time they assume their gorgeous plumage and like the flowering Indian Lotus display their bright pink colours. The long feathers of the mantle of the Large Flamingo are often raised and the cock birds stretch their long necks skywards and wave them about in elephantine manner. The breeding colony of the Large Flamingo in the Great Rann of Kutch is about the largest concentration of nesting birds of the species in the world. Let us hope that this national asset is preserved for times to come.

## GREAT BUSTARD

**T**HIS MAGNIFICENT SPECIES has of recent years been threatened with extinction in its natural habitat. It is a bird of open arid country and low grassy hills. At one time it was well distributed over the country. Now it lives in remote areas where it seeks safety from the ubiquitous poacher. In the last century the bird was not uncommon in areas where the black buck and chinkara were found, droves of ten to thirty birds being seen at various times of the year. The bird is now reduced in number, being shot indiscriminately by sportsmen and trapped by nomadic tribes who find it an easy prey, especially during the breeding season, at which time its egg is in danger of being trampled by domestic ungulates.

The great Indian Bustard (*Ardeotis nigriceps*) is easily recognised from its size, the cock exceeding a metre in height, while the hen is smaller and about the size of a peahen.

\**Rainwater pools*

In the cock, the black breast band is broader and complete and in old birds the neck is pure white. Some of the wing coverts in both sexes show ashy grey, white and blackish feathers.

It was soon after we had photographed the Florican at its nest that we received news of some Great Indian Bustards. The Bustards were many miles away from where the Floricans were breeding. They inhabited low undulating stony hills covered with short grass and close to long stretches of flat land studded with bushes and intersected by millet and cotton fields. The monsoon was coming to an end, and the main breeding season was almost over, so we made haste to reach our destination. On arrival in the Bustard country we lost no time in search for the Bustards. The grass had turned yellow but was wet with dew in the early morning becoming dry as tinder later in the day.

Our guide, an old Shikari, was leading us on to the ground in which he knew the Bustards regularly bred and were found almost throughout the year. After walking some miles, the Shikari stopped, and all three of us were immediately in view of three cock Bustards. It was a magnificent sight. We had just walked into a small hillock and looked over to see the three grand birds about two hundred metres away from us. The thick white necks and black cap, the black breast band on the white under parts and the brown upper plumage stood out distinctly as we looked through our binoculars. The birds were facing us but slowly turned sideways, all looking up at an angle in characteristic manner. Evidently they had seen us the moment we had appeared on the horizon. We sat down and watched the birds. After five minutes, one of the birds moved its head slightly, and then it began to walk, lifting one leg slowly and then the other ; the rest followed suit. In a few minutes they were all in a line, walking with their necks erect but with the bill pointing downwards as if looking into the grass. The grass was short, so we could clearly see their legs but not their feet. Evidently the birds were on the feed. As they walked sedately we could see them flush locusts and every now and then a cock would stop to pick one up. Occasionally a bird would break the line and run a few steps forward or sideways to snatch up a locust or some such insect or lizard, and then stop for a moment and one could see it being gobbled down the spacious throat. We kept watching them as they slowly went further and further away from us, and it seemed that they were covering the ground like beaters in a line. Our guide seeing our keen intention to follow them stoppéd us from doing so.

From observations that we made in the following days, we learnt that the cock birds took up separate positions on some high ground displaying their tail and neck feathers. Often we saw a bird inflate its neck sac almost to the ground, and the lower neck would wave in the wind and then we would hear a deep moaning sound quite audible at a distance, the tail being lifted up and down. However, we could never approach the Bustards without their sighting us, and they immediately moved away from their position. The cock birds would be seen together while feeding





*Great Stone Curlews—A pair at nest*



*Indian House Crows—Bold, black stealers*





*Crimsonbreasted Barbet above nest-site*



*Common Babbler at nest*





*Hen Marshall's lora at nest with fledgelings*





*Crow-Pheasant at nest-entrance*



*Indian River Tern at nest*





*Great Indian Bustard in cotton field*





*Little Grebe on floating nest*



*Cock Painted Spurfowl in light and shade*





*Indian Yelloweyed Babbler and nestlings*





*Large Flamingoes—Marching step by step (Slowly, softly, silently)*



but a solitary bird was not an unusual sight. A suspicious cock Bustard would emit a *honk*, sit down and look over some low bush and then fly away or walk away quickly, moving his head from one side to another while doing so.

At times, the head and neck of a cock Bustard with its flexible throat skin hanging limp would give the impression of a huge lizard's head or dragon's head and neck, the illusion became more fantastic when the head and neck joined the mantle and tail as seen from the rear, for the latter portion was shaped much like the upper parts of some gigantic beetle, the stout long legs seemed strangely attached to the imaginary set up.

It was not normal to see the sexes together and whilst we saw batches of cock and hen birds we seldom saw the two together. The hen birds were easy to tell owing to their smaller size and greyer necks. They would sometimes squat or more often, walk out of sight. It is extraordinary how quickly the Bustard can walk, trotting now and then when pressed. Quite contrary to the common belief, the Bustard is not a wary bird until it has been menaced, allowing quite close approach in a car or cart but avoiding very close approach when on foot. We were able to get within fifty metres of some birds without alarming them. And some that we flushed alighted within few hundred metres only to let us come upto them again. The Bustard invariably keeps his back towards one when approached, so it is difficult to obtain a frontal view of the bird revealing its black girdle on the white breast. At times, it can be clearly seen from the side.

The hen lays her single egg in grass or in a field. The egg is oval and usually reddish-brown or olive-brown in colour, with a few darker markings. The chick is fawn with black markings and walks as gracefully as its parents. The cock bird does not take any interest in the egg or young and is polygynous. When the chick is threatened with danger, the hen may hiss or *honk* loudly and feign injury. The chick emits a plaintive whistle when left alone for long.

In flight, the Bustard is fairly fast ; the wing strokes are slow and full like that of Cranes. The neck is kept outstretched and the legs are not always clearly seen, being hidden by the tail. In flight a light patch on the wings may be seen in some birds. The flight is low, and as a rule, once the birds have taken to wings, they do not settle until they have flown some distance away, often a few miles.

The Great Indian Bustard is a local migrant, flying to areas where there is suitable food for it, and returning to areas where it regularly breeds. The main food of the Bustard is locusts, but small snakes, lizards, centipedes, beetles, scorpions, snails, and other insects and reptiles are eaten. In the winter months it may include grain, green shoots and berries, but in smaller quantity as compared to animal food. During the monsoon, we have seen Bustards collecting in places where locusts and grasshoppers were abundant and with them we would often see flocks of Cattle

Egrets. They do not seem to resent association with the Cattle Egret and not once did we see any attempt to chase them away. However we observed that the Bustard was well adapted for catching the locust and could consume more food than the smaller Egret. The birds rest during the hot hours taking shelter under some bush or crops and are generally out feeding in the early morning and continue to do so till noon if the weather is not too warm. Again they feed in the afternoon till soon after sunset. They enjoy dust baths, and we have seen them doing so on roads. Bustards can cover a few miles easily in the course of their forays.

In the typical Bustard habitat there are found small ponds in the vicinity at which the birds come to drink, and it is at these places that they are ambushed and killed. It is a pity that the Great Indian Bustard does not enjoy the same protection given by the Hindus to the Peafowl and is now becoming a fast disappearing bird.

## GREAT STONE CURLEW

**T**HE GREAT STONE CURLEW or Great Stone Plover is sufficiently distinct in colour, shape and habits to be quite distinguishable from its brother species, the Indian Stone Curlew. It is identified by its cement-grey plumage, the slightly upturned lower mandible, the conspicuous black markings on the face, the pale grey to yellow legs, the black-and-white patch on the wings when in flight, and the sharp drawn-out whistle that it emits. The eyes are large and golden yellow, though in some birds they are a beautiful greenish yellow.

The Great Stone Curlew is slightly shyer than the Indian Stone Curlew, and has a stiffer wing beat while flying. It accelerates its flight for no special reason at all by quick wing strokes when disturbed. The safety of the Great Stone Curlew lies in its camouflage and very slow movement when walking and also by its flying over water when disturbed. It is, therefore, seldom caught by a bird of prey or ground predator. The bird keeps to open ground, amongst low rocks and in shingle, sand or flat muddy land where its own colours and pattern blend with the background. Amidst dry stones on lakesides, it is almost impossible to distinguish the bird from its background when motionless. It was in such conditions that we set out to photograph it.

We found a nest with two eggs amongst some stones on an islet in a lake. Actually no nest is made, the bird laying its eggs straight on the ground; often not even a scrape is made. The eggs were laid amongst some large stones about five metres away from the water and on the side of a stony



ridge which had formed into an islet. The afternoon and evening sun was favourable for photography and the hide had to be placed some distance away if the eggs were to be properly seen. The pair of Stone Curlews was not alarmed by the hide being placed so near. It did not hesitate to enter the nest when all was quiet. While we landed on the islet after wading through some water which divided the mainland from the islet, the two birds flew around us calling intermittently and then made for the opposite shore where they kept up their alarm calls. They did not fly in pair and alighted at different places some distance from each other. After everything had been set, the hide was left with a false lens as usual and we watched the parent bird settle on the eggs after hesitantly approaching the eggs a number of times without coming right on to them. On the third day, we commenced photography and succeeded in taking a number of pictures.

While we were at it, we noticed that the sexes were identical and it was impossible to tell which was the male and which the female. We could finally see a difference between the two birds ; one of them had the black mark at the base of the lower mandible shorter than in the other. But which one was the male was difficult to say. At last we presumed that the bird which kept longer to its duty of incubating was the female but we could never be sure of it. During the hot hours, we found that when a bird was fatigued while incubating, it would often call for help, and its mate would reluctantly come and relieve the sitting bird. However, during the early morning and late evening, these birds stood their duty pleasantly and one of the birds would fly to the opposite shore where it would commence to feed at the water edge.

The manner in which these birds move is ungainly, a sort of loping gait, a trot which appears clumsy. The Great Stone Curlew, however, is a handsome bird when seen at close quarters and its sedentary habit lends itself ideally to leisurely observation by a keen bird-watcher. We have often spent hours watching it with a pair of binoculars during sunlit hours, the birds calling to one another across a river or a lake.

## INDIAN COURSER

**T**HERE IS PROBABLY no Indian bird so silent and yet so active as the Indian Courser. Running and stopping intermittently with its head held up and chest out, the proud-looking bird moves lightly on its china-white long legs. When seen at close quarters it is a beautiful bird with its chestnut brown and bronze plumage and the white and black stripes across its face. The Courser is a bird of the open fields and plains. The birds are seen singly or in pairs not far apart and sometimes they gather in small loose groups.

The short run and the dip to pick up some food is characteristic when feeding. When alarmed the bird stands erect and motionless and if disturbed suddenly takes to wings. The dark broad wings enable the bird to rise almost vertically and with a series of rapid strong flaps of its wings it is soon up in the air. So fast can it ascend into the sky that it is seldom captured by birds of prey. When a bird of prey threatens the Courser, it becomes airborne rising high up before danger is in striking range. Moreover, capable of making sharp turns when flying, it can evade a fast stoop from a diving falcon. On the ground the bird utters no alarm before taking to the air or when menaced, as do so many ground nesting birds, but it stops motionless and braces itself up for the take-off.

Nature has endowed the Courser with perfect blending colours matching its natural habitat of ploughed fields or sandy-brown and rufescent terrain and a rapid and buoyant flight which provides for its safety. Yet the bird owing to its constant movement in the field draws attention to any eye scouring the landscape. It is equally alert in watching out for its enemies.

There is probably no bird which lays its eggs on the open ground and whose eggs are so difficult to find. The bird makes no pretence of building a nest or even a scrape but lays its eggs on the ground where they match perfectly. The bird itself is difficult to discern once it has sat on its eggs. Moreover, the bird does not approach its eggs in a direct manner but does so in its normal coursing and zig-zag manner stopping to pick up some food on the way. So if the observer has not followed its movements carefully he would find that the bird has vanished from sight. When disturbed from its eggs, it merely stands up and walks away nonchalantly, betraying no sign of agitation or resorting to any ruse to draw away the danger. Only in one instance have we seen the bird fluttering off the nest with legs dangling to divert our attention from the nest. The eggs themselves are closely mottled as if they were balls of sheep dung or of stone. So well do they blend with their background that we have found them almost invisible even at close quarters. Two eggs form the normal clutch.

When we had found the Courser's eggs, we placed our hide in the evening and drew it slowly closer towards them each day until we were close enough for photography. The pair of Coursers, the sexes looking alike, had got used to the hide and so we did not find it hard to take some pictures, the birds coming almost straight to the nest unmindful of the hide.

The sitting bird is always vigilant, ready to stand and walk away when threatened. We did however hear the bird emit a low grunt. The newly hatched chick blends even more than the eggs with its background, resembling the succulent short vegetation which covered the particular ground when we were photographing the bird at the nest. The chick is peppery buff in colour and gets darker with growth. The chick is a chip of the old block, running and stopping, puffing its chest out with its head and neck held slightly backwards; it behaves exactly like its parents, a behaviour graceful in the adult but rather ludicrous in someone so small. The fledglings and those in their first year have the upper parts speckled and are



not quite so brightly coloured on the head and breast. We found, the Courser had two breeding seasons one from March onwards and the other in October. But seasons in different parts of the country may differ according to the incidence of rains and climate.

## INDIAN HOUSE CROW

**A**MONGST BIRDS THE House Crow can be called the "Jack of all trades and master of none". He is the epitome of cunningness and yet deports himself with a most innocent face. Cawing continuously like a beggar at the window or door-step, he is waiting for the first opportunity to steal whether it be a diamond ring or a piece of cake. He will visit the refuse dumps and eat offal from any part of the earth, and yet will be ever ready to join a wedding or a lunch party, dressed as it were in black tail coat. Off duty he will catch mice or helpless birds or any animal life that he can lay his strong sharp-edged beak on. He will use his legs to clutch small objects alive or dead and to pilfer eggs from nests. Yet it is man's wasteful feeding habits and the litter caused by his domestic animals that has brought the crow nearer to human habitat, where he can be seen scavenging food from the rubbish heap or the kitchen waste. So it is partly man's fault to have attracted the House Crow close to his living. We have seen him being fed by innocent village folk, stealing milk from the milk-maid's bowl and snatching bread from the hands of a child.

The crow is indeed one of the cleverest birds in the world. But he meets his match in the Indian Koel who lays its eggs in the crow's nest, the young being reared by their foster parents. The cock Koel is a red-eyed, bluish black bird which sometimes attracts the female crow from its nest and sometimes the male too, while the brown-barred and white speckled female Koel lays its egg in the crow's nest. Nevertheless not always does the Koel succeed in its ruse. We have also seen the female Koel steal into the crow's nest alone in the early morning to lay. And this is done before incubation of the crow's eggs is well advanced.

House Crows breed from April to the monsoon months, whereas in Calcutta we have seen them nesting in February which is quite early. They make a nest of twigs, wires, strings and such other material which they wind round and round until the structure is large enough to house the entire family. The eggs of the crow are pale bluish grey, speckled with brown and grey. The eggs of the Koel are much like that of the crow but smaller and have greenish tinge to them and the spots are closer and reddish brown. The House Crow brings food to feed its mate and young either in the beak or in the pouch. At the time of feeding, the bulge in the pouch, filled with food is quite prominent.

In the monsoon, the House Crow devours many harmful beetles, locusts and their larvae, cockchafers, cockroaches, crickets and such animal life either turned up by the plough or found in forests or in the refuse dumps close to houses and villages. Much of what we saw seemed to be harmful insect pests. However, we have seen groups of crows robbing eggs and young of ground nesting birds in spring and in the dry hot weather.

A crow has a remarkable fraternity amongst its kind. When a crow has spied food which it alone cannot consume or tackle, it caws in a particular fashion, thus inviting all its members to join. Dead animals found in the field attract crows from all directions. Furthermore, crows will mob birds of prey and owls and we have often seen them pester eagles and falcons and hawks which have captured their prey. When large carnivores are at their kill crows become bold and attempt to grab a piece from the dead animal even when the predator is lying close by. The crow closely watches the eye and behaviour of the owner from whom he intends to steal food. He is a born observer, reading the mind of his subject or anticipating his move before it is made. He is also confiding but is always an opportunist. Noisy when roosting, crows gather in large flocks on the same trees for years. They also fly in company in their feeding forays settling at places where food is found. When returning to their roosts late in evening or venturing out before dawn to feed, the stringed flights of crows are daily movements like suburban trains.

The flapping flight of a crow is not fast yet he can turn swiftly in the air so as to evade the swoop of an eagle or falcon. We have seen crows make sharp turns and swoop down suddenly in playfulness or when threatened by some winged enemy. We have seen crows become interlocked while fighting and a whole flock of them watching the wrestling with cheering and jeering as if it was some match. Crows often forgather on house tops or lawns as a social meeting and then suddenly depart.

The population of crows keeps exploding near cities and towns and there they seem to be evicting the more interesting and colourful birds. They also are great egg-stealers whether it be from the poultry yard or a colony of breeding water birds. We have actually seen a Jungle Crow attempt to rob the large egg of a Sarus Crane. All nesting birds regard the crow with contempt and we are sorry to say that many a nest has been robbed by a crow on which we have had our eyes on to photograph. In the countryside, a small hut or shed means food for the crow and he will investigate all possibilities of obtaining his food. A conspicuous hide is therefore a sort of sign board for a crow indicating some refreshment room and unless a bird's nest which is close to it is well concealed and protected, the crow will eventually discover it and destroy its contents.

If we wish the number of crows to decrease we must dispose of garbage in such a manner that it cannot be eaten by crows. The control of the crow family by the Koel is but a small effort in comparison with the huge crow population.



## INDIAN RIVER TERN

**T**HIS IS A common bird seen flying over the rivers and lakes throughout India. It is also seen on the sea-coast. The River Tern is recognised by its long pointed wings and acutely forked tail, orange-yellow to yellow bill, red feet which are short and a black crest forming a sort of cap. The rest of the upper parts are a pale grey, the tail being whitish at the base. The lower parts are greyish white. It is about the size of a pigeon but much slimmer.

The River Tern feeds on small fish and insects found in water and close to it, and hence, is seen flying over water in a buoyant and graceful manner diving or swooping down to catch its prey near the surface of the water. It may be seen singly or in small groups, now and then emitting its short and rather harsh call. The birds breed from February to May and some birds may even lay in June. At the time of courtship the birds congregate in small flocks and are noisy and their aerial displays are awe-inspiring, after which they lay their eggs either in colony or singly. The site chosen for nesting may vary. It may be on some sandbank, in shingle or sandy islet. In lakes, small islets without tall grass and trees is the usual type chosen for nesting, but we have found the birds nesting on rocks on a lakeside. The nest is normally a scrape in the sand, but we have seen some that were lined with twigs and grass. The eggs are a greyish brown to buffy brown, marked with dark spots, scrolls or streaks. Any disturbance at the nesting colony or nest is immediately resented by the birds. No sooner they see something approaching their nests they call repeatedly and attempt to attack the intruder, be it man, animal or bird. Their chief enemy is the House Crow which, when it gets a chance, steals their eggs.

It was on a large riverside in the month of May, that we had found a nest of River Tern on a sandbank. It was a solitary nest; many eggs had already hatched. The riverside was hot and the sand burning with heat during the afternoon. We wondered how many eggs would survive the heat but the parent birds continuously shaded them from the infuriating rays of the sun which cast their spell on the sandy shore. There were many birds on the riverside. Besides the River Terns, we saw flocks of Comb Ducks and small Whistling Teals, Pheasant-Tailed Jacanas, Redwattled Lapwings, a variety of White Egrets, Sarus Cranes, Open-billed Storks and others such as the Blacknecked and Whitenecked Storks, and Pied Wagtails which stood on outcropping of rocks and sand. Blackwinged Stilts, Spurwinged Plovers and Blackbellied Terns were seen along the river. Occasionally, one would notice a Brahminy Kite or a Pallas's Fishing Eagle soaring above the river. The clear rippling waters of the river abounded with fish, and other life was plentiful. Cormorants, Spoonbills and Shags rested at the water's edge after their full meal and huge black turtles basked on the sands near the water. Insect-eating birds, such as Green Bee-eaters and Paradise Flycatchers were seen crossing the river. But the most impressive riverside bird

was the handsome Skimmer, its pied plumage and coral red bill shining in the sun like lipstick. Little Pratincoles in their sandy brown dress merged with their background and a whole flock would suddenly rise from what appeared to be a bleak sandbank. Jerdon's Little Ringed Plovers were seen all along the river and we also saw some migrants, the Greenshanks and the Common and Green Sandpipers on the waterside. A Grey Heron stood motionless in shallow water surrounded by Pond Herons as if in attendance.

The taking of photographs of the River Tern did not present a difficult problem. At first the pair was agitated by our presence and the setting up of the hide, but soon became used to it, and as soon as one of us was out of sight, one of the birds would alight close to the nest, calling with bill wide open, stepping quickly up to the eggs and, then, after some inspection, turning round over them and settling down quietly. When alighting on the nest, the wings were kept open high above the back and head for a moment, and the partly webbed feet could be seen clearly. In the beginning the camera shutter disturbed the alighting bird and it would take off immediately since the hide was not farther than two metres. This is often the case with many birds, but they soon get used to the noise. During the hot hours, the parents would change duties of sitting on the eggs, and invariably the birds would wet their bellies—this is what most waterside birds do to moisten the eggs—and this the River Terns did while flying or when close to the water. When the eggs were hatched, both parents became excited and were more active, feeding the young and shading them from the intense heat. When feeding with small fish, which appeared almost as large as the chicks, the parent birds were particular to see that the food was not too dry. If a chick rejected the food, usually a small fish, given to it the parent bird would fly and take it to the waterside and dip it in water and then return. The young would then accept the food. Both the birds kept a vigil over the young and watered them by wetting their underparts and then standing over them. The young were able to walk a little the very first day, and we noticed the parent birds making a new scrape a metre away from the old nest and enticing the young to it. The parents walked in front of the young while calling and offering food some centimetres away from them. The downy chicks looked much like newly hatched chicks of the domestic fowl but later the short legs were apparent.

In districts where lakes and river mouths are not far from the sea, we saw that the River Terns would fly to the sea-coast where food was plentiful and easier to catch and bring it back to feed the young. A distance of eight to sixteen kms. is not much for a River Tern to travel as it is capable of flying fast. After the breeding season is over, we have seen River Terns in small flocks evidently migrating from one place to another. They are obviously local migrants becoming scarce in the places they breed in. On the seaside we have seen them in autumn, but at this time they lose their bright colours and are less heard than at other times. The breeding of this bird in lakes depends much upon the water level and fish supply. As the water level drops, small islets emerge from the lakes and these, when they are dry, form ideal nesting sites for colonies of these Terns. As the hot weather





*A pair of small Indian Pranticoles at nest*

*Little Tern alighting on eggs*







*Little Tern at nest*

*A Pair of Common Mynas*







*Peacock in forest*



*Peahen nest in forest*





*A pair of Siberian or Great White Cranes in Keoladeo Ghana, Bharatpur*





*Sarus Crane defending egg from Jungle Crow*

*Demoiselle Cranes in flight*







*Short-toed Eagle alighting on the nest*

*A pair of Short-toed Eagles with an eaglet*





*Cock Florican about  
to attack Decoy*



*Sirkeer Cuckoo drinking*

*Rufousbacked Shrike at nest*







*Waders in a Salt Marsh*

*Stone Curlew at nest*





approaches, the islets which are near the shore grow larger, eventually joining with the mainland. When this happens, the breeding colony is endangered by animal life which may destroy its eggs and young; it often becomes a race against time for the birds to hatch their eggs and bring up their young before such adverse conditions appear. Sometimes we have seen that only a small channel of shallow water remains across which one could wade without difficulty, by the time the eggs have hatched. On these small islands other birds, like the Blackbellied Tern, Jerdon's Little Ringed Plover, Great Stone Curlew, and the Redwattled Lapwing, also breed if there is room enough. But some of these birds breed earlier than the Terns and hence leave the islet for the River Terns to nest. A breeding colony of River Terns on a lake islet is a mass of birds with their eggs. For the bird lover it is a great pleasure to watch River Terns from a hide placed amidst a colony of birds which are breeding. Courtship scene, such as the male River Tern feeding the female with his forked tail being raised and lowered while bowing, is interesting to watch. Both sexes are alike and incubate. When a bird arrives to join its mate at the nest and even when flying overhead there is much calling to each other. Sudden outbreak of choruses is common on the breeding islet, and equally suddenly all the birds may become silent.

Graceful on the wing, the Tern walks rather clumsily on the ground, moving but little, it walks with quick steps while approaching the nest. The River Tern is a fascinating bird to watch during the breeding season, its aerial manoeuvres evoke admiration and its behaviour at the nest appears filled with human sentiments.

## INDIAN ROLLER

IN NORTH, Central and Eastern India, the Indian Roller is known as Nilkant. The bird is venerated by the Hindus who regard it as a carrier of good omen. Sighting the bird during the Dussehra festival is considered particularly auspicious.

The Indian Roller gets its name from its habit of rolling or turning somersault while in flight. These acrobatics are indulged in mainly during the courting of the female by the male. But these birds are known to roll at other times also.

The Indian Roller is also known as Blue Jay. The Jays belong to the family which includes crows and magpies. The Indian Roller is not to be confused with the Kashmir Roller, an Asian species of the European Roller which is an autumn migrant to Western India. The Indian Roller is the size of the pigeon. When seen perched, it appears a sombre tawny brown. The crown looks bluish green and the neck

and throat purple-blue or lilac. While in flight, the bird reveals bands of striking dark purple and light blue colours on its wings. In flight, the Roller is slow but graceful. It has, however, a powerful propensity to rise buoyantly and rapidly up into the sky and ascending steeply with fairly rapid wing beats. Because of this dexterity in the air the Roller does not fall an easy prey to hawks and eagles.

The Indian Roller is a pugnacious and solitary bird; it does not allow its own kind to venture near its feeding territory. It is seen in pairs only during the breeding season, at which time it becomes quite noisy, displaying itself in the air and making itself generally conspicuous.

A pair of Rollers in courtship is quite a sight. Perched together, head and bill pointing skyward and wings opening and closing, they emit high-pitched calls. These harsh throaty calls can also be heard when the bird is disturbed or frightened.

Sluggish in habits, the Indian Roller waits and watches from some prominent perch either close to the ground or on some high vantage post, for crawling animal life to move. It may also cock its head to look at some bird of prey soaring overhead or a flying insect high up in the sky. On spying some prey closeby on the ground it leaves its perch with a few effortless beats of its wings and glides swiftly to catch its prey in its strong blackish bill, breaking its speed at the last moment by opening wide its brilliantly coloured wings as it alights. After swallowing its food it often returns to the same perch. It has a remarkably keen eyesight and is capable of spying large or small insects far beyond a normal eyesight could discern them. Much of its prey is taken from the ground, rarely does the Roller chase its prey except those slow flying insects which rise during the midday sun or make short flights off the ground. Much of its hunting is done during bright sunlight whereas in the cold and moist mornings the bird is often seen hunched puffing out its feathers. The Roller takes a varied diet of insects, though frogs, toads, tadpoles, lizards, small snakes, worms, centipedes, scorpions and even mice are included. It is perhaps one of our most beneficial birds devouring harmful insect pests. Thus the bird is a friend of the farmer and at times quite confiding. The Roller may enter courtyards, gardens and be seen following domestic livestock and wild ungulates as they flush its food from under their feet.

The nesting season commences from February and ends about September according to local conditions. The bird lays three to five glossy white oval-shaped eggs in some hollow of a tree trunk, branch or in some hole in a bank, wall or cavity. The nest may be without lining or with lining consisting of soft material. Both sexes incubate and rear the young ; incubation taking about 18 days. We have seen these birds guarding their nest-hole against winged and terrestrial predators.

This bird was at one time severely persecuted and traded for its beautiful bright feathers in European markets and became quite scarce in some parts of India.



The States of Madhya Pradesh and Karnataka have adopted the Indian Roller as their State bird emblem.

## ROSERINGED PARAKEET

**T**HE COMMON GREEN PARAKEET is so familiar in the plains of India that nobody really gives it a second glance. No one stops to admire the fine green beautiful birds among the blossoms of the Flame of the Forest or pauses to watch them fly across a pink evening sky. The Green Parakeet is often seen nesting in the walls of a house, in a tree or in a cavity in a rock. Screaming flocks of Parakeets descend to feed on pigeon lofts where pious folk scatter grain for pigeons. At the time of harvest, these birds are a curse to the farmer who has to guard his fields from their constant depredations. Fruit trees are choice food and sprouts of green vegetables are not spared either. Destructive though it is who would steel his heart against such a beautiful and attractive creature. The handsome Parakeet is always a source of delight to children. Caged in silver in a palace, or hanging in a crude iron cage from the thatched roof of a village hut, the parakeet's appeal remains the same. Even in the busiest slums of crowded cities, this trim Parakeet will be seen spreading a splash of green and yellow as it darts from roof to floor and back again or whistling and talking from his cage.

The Green Parakeet is, as its name indicates, green in colour. The colour is paler on the lower parts, the central tail feathers have a bluish tinge, the underside and outer feathers yellow, the curved beak is red, and the males have a rose-pink and black collar band on the neck, and have a powdery bluish-purple tinge on the head. The female is a pale green all over. The eyes are expressive as the iris contracts and dilates according to the temperament of the bird. In this species, one gets freaks, those which are yellow are called Lutinos and a powdery blue form has been developed in captivity.

As pets, Parakeets are charming, easy to tame. They are attached to the owner, calling out when approached and perching on the shoulder, playfully nibbling the ear or pushing the bill between the lips, all the while softly squealing in ecstasy. In the wilds, the cock makes an affectionate husband, following his spouse wherever she goes, and how funny his antics are when courting her ! He alights a little distance away from her, softly whistles and then, with bold steps, marches closer, draws himself up and raises each leg at a time moving it up and down in front of her. This is followed by a delicate kiss. The object of all this attention either falls to the gay suitor's charms or, getting bored, flies off trailed by him in hot pursuit.

While feeding on ripe figs or in a cornfield, the parakeet is wasteful, dropping half-eaten food to the ground. The food is often plucked and held in the feet to be picked and eaten at leisure.

In flight, the Parakeet is swift in spite of his short wings. This enables him to travel long distances in search of food. The long tail acts as a good rudder and the bird often turns from side to side in its flight through the air. The yellow feathers of the underwing offer a contrast to the dark primaries, and a flock of parakeets alighting are a colourful sight. These pranky birds have a habit of playing in the air, flying in groups and chasing each other and other birds. The rainy season seems to enliven them and we have seen them flying in the rain, though at this time they are often in heavy moult. The cold season is the main breeding time.

The island of a lake palace at Udaipur in Rajasthan offers excellent demonstration of the roosting habits of this bird. Here, year after year, Green Parakeets come in the late evening to roost on the trees of the island. First the birds alight on a particular tree and then all at once fly swiftly and low to the island in groups. Batch after batch assemble and leave in turn for their respective roosts. This is a rare spectacle, as one sees thousands of parakeet come home to roost and leave before dawn. They come from almost all directions but particularly from areas where there are green trees and orchards. A chorus of parrot talk is heard at bed time and in the early morning, before the birds fly off to feed.

## INDIAN SKIMMER

**T**HE SKIMMER IS a tern-like bird with long pointed wings and a somewhat grotesque bill. The lower mandible is slightly longer than the upper one, which emphasises the oddity of the stout bill, which when open gives the impression of a pair of tailor's scissors. The ugliness of the bill, however, is compensated by its bright colour, it being coral to orange-red, and tipped pale yellow. The bill in some birds is rather blunt at the end. The bright conspicuous bill, black and white plumage and the red legs give the Skimmer a handsome appearance.

The flight of the Skimmer is also a delight to watch. The long well-cut wings help it to turn while the short but slightly forked tail acts as a convenient rudder. Whereas the Terns seem adapted to sudden turns, split-second dives and spurts in speed, the Skimmer appeared as a *de luxe* model for straight long distance flight and stability in the air, its manner of turning being slower if not more graceful than that of the River Tern. We did not think that it was inferior in speed than the Terns. As regards the colour pattern, we thought the Skimmer was more impressive than all the Terns we saw. The size of the Skimmer is a bit of an illusion for it is



not much larger than a Jungle Crow. However, the long wings, large head and grotesquely long bill give it an appearance of being large. The legs are rather short in proportion to the length of the bird, and when it walked we noticed that it waddled.

There were three pairs of Skimmers nesting on a small sandy promontory on the riverside not far from where we had seen the nest of the Black-bellied Tern. We had seen the Skimmers from a distance lying on the sand as if half submerged about a week earlier but we had no time to investigate the place. In fact when we passed the birds, they would all fly up at once and we never suspected any of them to be nesting. However, one day we saw two pairs of Skimmers further down the river and these were seen turning round in a circle as if scooping out some sand and making themselves comfortable in the depression in which they sat. Obviously, this looked like nesting but when we visited the place next day no birds were seen though the scooped depressions were there. Hence we rather ignored the Skimmers until we found a small group that had laid its eggs and was brooding.

The three nests were placed in a row along the length of a sandy promontory at a distance of about ten metres from each other. At the broader end of the promontory which joined the main land, there were some green tufts of aquatic vegetation and a slight mound on which a hide could be placed. This was in fact an ideal sight for placing the hide as it gave a clear view of the nest and the eggs. When the hide was about to be placed it was realised that a River Tern's nest containing two eggs was situated near the mound and only twenty centimetres from where the hide would have to be set up. As the photographing of the Skimmer was the main object, we felt that one would have to sacrifice the nest and eggs of the River Tern by taking the risk of setting up the hide next to it, anticipating the River Tern to desert its eggs. When the hide was erected and we had left the place, we saw that the River Terns were much agitated. So were the Skimmers whose nest was only five metres from the hide. They were far from happy at the strange structure that had been set up in front of their nests. After about half an hour, to our surprise, we saw the River Tern alight near the hide and walk on to its eggs.

The next day, as we approached the nests of the Skimmer we saw them take wing and settle closeby on a sandy stretch. Then as we came closer they began to utter a sort of nasal sound, after which they took wing and circled low over the patch of sand. We then realised how handsome the birds were and how graceful they were in flight. It was early morning and the sky was cloudy but bright. This condition seemed ideal for photographing and we wasted no time in fixing ourselves up. The Skimmer behaved perfectly. At close range, the Skimmer's head looked like that of a large parrot, the round beady eyes looking rather small for the size of the head. The long colourful bill as if stuck on to its head appeared queer and one could imagine the bird to be a hybrid of a parrot and a toucan if ever there was such a possibility. To give the bird a human outlook would be stretching things too far, but the bird

with its pied dress, the long black primary feathers of the wings and its white lower parts and collar gave a vivid impression of a short man in tail coat and white waistcoat.

The bird took no notice of the hide and its occupant though it must have heard some noise inside the hide at times. Through a fine gauze we could watch the bird comfortably. The pleasure of watching a bird at close quarters without it being aware of your presence can only be imagined by those who have experienced it. The River Tern, which was closer to the hide, chattered frequently but the Skimmer was silent and sat on its nest with dignity. It was a contrast which one could not help noticing. On the slightest of disturbance, the River Tern would call out and fly up from its nest and return to it quickly, while the Skimmer hardly ever moved out unless it was compelled to do so. It would walk away from the nest or fly up only to alight closeby for a drink or to preen itself. Both sexes are alike and assist in incubation. Unlike the Terns, which can be observed to feed at almost all hours of the day, the Skimmers commence their feeding flights in the late evening and at dawn. As they fed we also noticed that they did so over water surface, skimming and ploughing it often in decreasing circles with slow wing beats. As other subjects on the riverside presented themselves for photography we reluctantly moved on to them, leaving the Skimmers to brood their eggs.

## STONE CURLEW

**T**HE STONE CURLEW is also known as the Goggle-eyed Plover owing to its large and round eyes. The bird is the size of a crow but with a larger head and longer legs. The upper plumage is greyish-brown, the lower is white to buffy-white. The head and breast are streaked, the feathers of the upper parts having a black central streak. A blackish moustachial line is present on the face. The eyes are golden yellow. The bill is yellow and tipped black. A conspicuous white bar on the wing coverts can be seen from a distance. The legs are pale yellow.

This bird is also known as the Stone Plover. It is found in most parts of India in open fallow land, thin deciduous forest and thorny scrub. It occurs in stony open country studded with a few thorny trees and in cultivation, preferring the dry arid type of country. The bird enjoys seclusion being found in fruit orchards and patches of open grassland, selecting areas where it is seldom disturbed. During the day it rests and sleeps usually under the shade of a stunted tree or some such shady cover. The birds are seen in pairs during the breeding season but in the monsoon and winter months we have seen them gather in small flocks of about twenty to forty birds. The presence of the Stone Curlew in the neighbourhood is imme-



diately known by its wailing call which is normally heard at dawn, in the evening and at night. These calls are commonly heard at the beginning of the hot weather and summer months. This is the time when they breed. The Stone Curlew wanders out of its home after sunset and feeds during the night. It may be seen flying at dusk and clighting on some pasture or lawn seeking insect life. It is a shy bird and when approached it often squats or runs, stopping to look back to see if it is being followed. Sometimes it half squats and turns its body, head and bill pointing straight towards one and slowly pivoting itself as one walks past it. When flushed it takes a few steps and then with rapid wing beats flies away.

The Stone Curlew is rather a monotonous bird to watch, its movements being very slow. While being observed it seems very self-conscious hardly ever relaxing its stiff posture. It was during the months of February and March that we often listened to the mournful cries of the Stone Curlew and thought that the birds were about to breed. A number of pairs were heard calling to each other, sometimes during the day, in a large patch of scrub forest. We had seen a number of pairs in a particular patch of scrub under some thorny trees which formed an umbrella-like canopy. Under their shades, the birds would be seen standing or sitting quite close to each other.

A month later we found two light-fawn-coloured eggs with sepia-brown blotches. There was no nest made but only a scrape, the eggs were on bare ground. Owing to the bad lighting for photography we did not attempt setting up a hide. It was in the hot month of April that we found a suitable nest close to a road, in scrub. As we approached the nest-site, we noticed the parent bird stand up and walk quickly away from the nest without betraying any sign of alarm. As we approached close to the eggs, the bird which had stood some distance away from us, squatted and tried to entice us away but seeing that there was no response it suddenly ran a few metres and rose into the air emitting its sharp call. Its mate which had been closeby and unobserved also darted away in another direction calling as it flew. We then set up our hide about ten metres away and left, hoping to get the birds accustomed to it. On the sixth day we had brought the hide nearer by half the distance and were prepared to take our first photograph of the bird at nest. Fifteen minutes passed in the hide and yet there was no sight of the bird. As we were preparing to leave the hide, we suddenly saw that the pair of Stone Curlews were all the time gazing at us from a depression in the ground, their heads and eyes in level with the ground and matching the short dry grass that gave them protection. The pair had been watching us and studying our movements all the while. The best thing to do now was to leave the place and allow the birds to get over their suspicion and come back to the nest.

The next day we returned and this time every precaution was taken. We saw that the birds were not watching while one of us entered the hide. The Stone Curlew returned to the nest hesitatingly but without fear, walking a few steps and then stopping with one leg lifted until it reached the eggs.

Then the bird slowly sat on the eggs. This was the moment, and the photograph was taken.

Both sexes incubate and take care of the young. At the time of hatching both birds keep a vigilant watch against danger. A sharp short whistle is emitted to warn the young and a hiss-like *Kharr* is heard. For flying birds of prey, a special warning cry is uttered. The young in down are slate-grey and striped and are able to walk just a few hours after hatching. Two clutches are sometimes laid if one is destroyed. Unlike the Redwattled Lapwing and some other birds, the Stone Curlew does not fly over the intruder or call incessantly when its eggs or young are in danger. Instead, it tries to entice him away by injury-simulation. Normally the Stone Curlew is not preyed upon much as it is alert and remains under cover during day-time, its colours blending excellently with its natural background. Nevertheless, when leaving its abode at dusk and returning to it, while flying, it may offer itself an easy prey to a fast flying falcon seeking its prey. The Stone Curlew is seldom molested by man and its population in certain areas seems to have increased over the years.

## TAWNY EAGLE

**T**HIS IS OUR COMMON eagle of the plains. The colour phases of this species vary from dark blackish brown to ivory-white. In all these phases the blackish brown primaries are seen and the tail is faintly barred. In its common tawny-brown phase, the eagle looks like the Pariah Kite except for its size and the rounded tail. The legs of the Tawny Eagle are feathered to the toes, which are yellow to pale yellow or whitish yellow. The cere is pale waxy yellow to yellow and the eyes are brown. In flight, the wings of the Tawny Eagle are held somewhat backwards. The sexes are alike except in size, the female being larger.

Found throughout the plains of India, the species ascends the hills and may be seen at various altitudes. It is known to feed on carrion and to rob other birds of prey of their legitimate food. Its normal food consists of a variety of animal life, mostly small rodents and birds, and we have even seen it eat eggs of birds. There is probably no type of country that this eagle does not inhabit. It can be seen in the midst of a bustling city as often as in an open desert. It is fond of cultivated tracts, scrub and wasteland, but shuns dense humid forests.

The Tawny Eagle is not a shy bird and permits fairly close approach. A common sight is a pair of Tawny Eagles sitting not far apart on two separate large trees. In the breeding season a pair may be seen seated together on some solitary thorny tree, whereas telegraph posts on the side of a road or railway line are frequently made use of by them to perch on. The nesting season is a long one, commencing from the middle of October right





*Cock Small Minivet feeding hen at nest*





*Tailor-bird at Leaf-nest*





*Cock Whitebellied Minivet feeds his family at nest*





*Cock Yellow-fronted Pied Woodpecker at nest-hole*



*Yellow-Wattled  
Lapwing in  
scrubland*





*Black or King Vulture and nestling*



*Young Female  
Sparrow-Hawk  
ready for hunting*





*Purple Sunbird at nest*



*Spurwinged Plover  
at nest*





*Rufousbacked Shrikes—Pair at nest with young*



*Sirkeer Cuckoo feeding nestlings*





*Sarus Cranes taking off*

*A family trio of Siberian White Cranes*





up to June, though most birds lay during the cold season. The breeding season is hailed by a pair of eagles by spectacular displays in the air; these consist of a series of dives by the male in line with or below its mate, sometimes emitting guttural calls. The flapping of wings in between the dives is usually quick and there may be a short interval between each display. Such courtship display sometimes continues even after the eggs are laid. This eagle prefers nesting sites on tops of solitary large trees. The nest is made of twigs and branches and is sometimes lined with leaves. Both sexes help in building the nest and rearing the young. One to two eggs are laid.

It was at the end of the monsoon that a nest of this eagle was found in a patch of scrub forest close to where we were living. The bird had built its nest on top of a *babul*\* tree and had laid two eggs. Soon after incubation had advanced, we slowly built up a *machan*, the time taken in doing so took over a week. The platform was about seven metres high and in line with the nest. On this the hide was set and we did not enter it until the eggs had hatched. The small chicks in down were white. At this stage, the hen bird guarded the chicks from sunrays and protected them from other birds of prey. At one time we observed the hen stooping at and driving away a King Vulture. The cock often brought food to the nest but hesitated to take on the duties of the hen. He was a shyer bird leaving the nest the moment we appeared near the hide and not returning to the nest as long as it suspected our presence in the hide. Both parents would leave the nest and young sometimes for over an hour, circling high in the sky. While we were watching the nestlings, we noticed that a pair of Whitethroated Munias was building its ball nest of grass just below the eyrie. They kept on coming and going even while the eagle was on the nest. Both Eagles brought food to the nest, one at a time, though often meeting at the nest. The hen bird normally preferred to stay on guard at the nest when the nestlings were young. She became quite used to us as we looked through the hole in the hide and merely blinked when we kept a continuous stare at her which was not quite the thing to do. Mostly rodents were brought to the nest. The hen bird would tear small pieces out of a dead rat or squirrel and delicately offer it to the nestlings. Later, we saw mole-rats being brought to the nest. This was a precaution as the Eagles were not always certain of catching their prey when the young were hungry. When birds such as pigeons and doves, usually fledglings and squabs, were brought to the nest, they were plucked or partly so, some parts of the bodies being eaten by the parent birds. This made it difficult to tell exactly what bird the Eagles had captured. None of the food was in live condition when brought to the nest. The nestlings when hungry would raise their heads and turn them about, as if looking for their parents, scrambling to the edge of the nest and becoming very restless.

The surplus food in the eagle's nest was often a temptation for kites and other small birds of prey and we even saw House Crows coming to snatch a piece.

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\**Acacia arabica*

But the adult Eagles would not allow any bird to pilfer their store of food which was continuously being replenished from time to time. As the nestlings grew, we saw bloodsucker and monitor lizards, Bush-Quail and field rats being brought to the nest to feed the young. When the young reached the fledgling stage, both parents would fly away to search for food and return after long intervals to the nest. At one time it was amusing to find that one of our own chickens had been killed and brought to feed the young. As the chicken was half plucked, it was difficult to tell what the Eagle had brought and for a moment it looked like a young half-grown Peafowl. One could see our house from the hide in the distance and the bird had come from that direction, but even this was not sufficient proof of the fact that the bird had caught and brought one of our home-bred chickens. So, returning to the house a little later, we had it confirmed. This particular pair of Tawny Eagles had been seen for a number of years breeding closeby and frequently visiting our poultry farm, but it had never so far caught any of our fowls ; this was the first time they had done so. Normally, the eagles would soar high above the house and wait for a Common Kite to pick up some titbit left over from the kitchen and then both of them would dive on the unfortunate Kite and compel it to release its prey, which would be caught in mid air if it had not fallen to the ground.

The grown up nestling had. we noticed, a remarkable eyesight even from a very young age. It could discern its parents high up in the sky and would emit a soft whistle. When fully fledged it called in a yelping manner when any of its parents was in sight. We also noticed that it felt the heat from the sun, and would often open its bill and pant. Before leaving the nest, the fledgling would flap its wings and take to air a few feet above the nest each day and this exercise gave it confidence before it took its first flight which was unsteady and low. Now we realised why the eagle preferred to select some tree which was higher than the rest or one that was solitary, for it is necessary that the young should not have much obstruction when taking its first flight.

## YELLOWEYED BABBLER

**T**HIS BABBLER REALLY does not babble. It has a loud liquid whistle that is a source of joy in our sun-drenched plains, but for the rest, it is a true babbler in its habits of scurrying among dense shrubberies or hopping up a tall grass stem to view the world and announce its presence by a sweet call, and then dropping down again into its labyrinthian habitat of grass, branches and thorns. It is also a great skulker and most difficult to observe except when flushed temporarily out of one thicket into another nearby. This babbler lives in pairs or small family parties after the monsoon breeding season, and is distinguishable by a rich rufous-brown



upper plumage, a long loosely attached, half cocked tail, whitish lower parts and eyebrow and a very conspicuous orange-yellow ring round each eye. The bill is black. The sexes are alike and the birds are much smaller than the well-known 'Seven Sisters'. Almost all the grassy patches and thick clumps of thorn and other thickets throughout the country harbours pairs of these little babblers. It has possibly an isolated distribution in the drier north-west, being absent over large tracts and occurring along banks of rivers and in scrub-choked ravines in grassland.

The general skulking approach in the bush makes it difficult to find this Babbler's nest though the loud proclaiming call of the male resounds and is a pointer to its vicinity. With some care, however, and a great deal of patience, nests can be found when the young have hatched, for, unlike most birds, the male calls out from various halting stages on his way to the nest with food. Following him from bush to bush through field glasses one suddenly finds him precipitating down a thick foliated shrubbery, it is followed by a long silence and then the bird emerges out in flight on to a nearby vantage point to call out again. Parting the foliage where the bird suddenly disappeared often reveals a deep cup of grass, lined outside profusely with cobwebs, built on a fork at a low height from the ground and the surrounding grass wound with the nest as additional support. The nest is a neat structure very unlike the untidy stick-nests of the commoner Babblers. When agitated, the parents fly bobbling up and down, twisting the tail in all directions and uttering a rapid *quip, quip, quip*.

The two nests we photographed had eggs; one nest had three and the other five. Even after long sittings in the hide the birds never really were at ease in front of the camera 'eye'. And more than once while entering the bush containing the nest, they approached warily all the while and looked with suspicion at the camera lens. Then the slightest noise in the hide sent the bird scuttering out of the bush. Once on the threshold of the nest when there were fledglings, all fear left the parents and they became completely oblivious of the camera. Both sexes normally came together, the one waiting patiently on a nearby bush while the other fed, and then coming nervously to the nest to deliver its share while the first bird flew away. Both birds after feeding the young would fly away, yet the cock often alighted on a perch next to the nest, before doing so.

The food brought to feed the young consisted mostly of large brown chrysalises and moths, with an occasional green grub, all picked up no doubt from wet mouldy earth below the thickets. It took long for these very considerable mouthfuls to be satisfactorily disposed, being placed in the wide gapes of each nestling in turn and finally helped down the gullet of the most voraciously hungry young and anxiously watched by the parents on its way down. The recipient would then be given a gentle nabbing with the bill to encourage it to defecate, and the faecal packet would be received in the bill and carried off or swallowed by the parent bird. This "home is my castle" attitude was always a pleasant surprise with a bird that is normally a skulker and specifically shy by nature. The fledglings

leave the nest with an alacrity if disturbed, and dive into the dense vegetation below the nest.

It is interesting to note that the Pied Crested Cuckoos, those smart members of the parasitic group of cuckoos, victimise nests of the Babblers laying blue eggs, but we have not recorded them paying their nefarious attention to the Yelloweyed Babblers. This is strange, because these foisterers have a habit of perching on tall shrubs keeping a sharp look on all sides for the more respectable avian householders within the community and the nest of the Yelloweyed Babbler can hardly escape the careful search of those sharp eyes.

## LITTLE RINGED PLOVER

**THIS LITTLE PLOVER** is one of the smallest waders to be found in India. It is of the size of a Rain Quail, and is a handsome little bird recognisable by a broad black pectoral band on a white breast, a black-and-white forehead and a white collar. Other features are yellow legs and the orange-yellow base of the bill. The upper plumage is a bronzy-brown when seen in sunlight. It is found in most parts of India, mainly at watersides.

While we were photographing the Great Stone Curlew we found the nest of this species on the same islet. This saved us a good deal of trouble trying to locate its nest elsewhere. Therefore, soon after we had photographed the Large Plover we moved our hide towards the smaller one. The Ringed Plover had already seen our hide not far from its own nest and was not disturbed by it when we placed it as near as three metres to its nest. Although we did not attempt to photograph it the same day, we knew that the bird would return to the nest within half an hour. After seeing that it did, we departed, only to come the next morning. It is always good to make sure that a bird returns to its nest when the hide is placed quite close, as some birds, if they are seriously disturbed, do not return to the eggs so long as the hide is near the nest. The correct procedure is to place the hide a good distance away and to bring it closer each day. Although on a small islet it may sometimes be impossible to do so.

When we returned to the islet, we saw that the brooding bird immediately left the nest and began to entice us away from the nest by feigning to be wounded, ruffling its feathers and dragging its body along the ground with wings and tail half open. Neglecting this demonstration and keeping our eyes fixed on the spot where she had risen from, we walked close to the nest. The sandy grey eggs were finely spotted, matching perfectly with the fine sand in which they were laid. The nest consisted of small grit with a depression in the centre in which three eggs had been laid. It



seemed a late clutch, as most eggs are laid in February and early March and this was the beginning of April. The nest is usually made in shingle. It is not difficult to take photographs of this species, as once they get used to the click of the camera and the shining lens, they are quite at ease. A bird would start calling in friendly way to its mate, upon which the latter would immediately run up to that bird and then both birds would exchange some notes, and take over one-by-one the duty of sitting over the eggs. The scene appeared most domestic, both birds equally sharing the incubation work.

The male bird could be distinguished in spite of the fact that sexes were rather alike. The male seemed to have a broader breast band and the markings on the forehead were more conspicuous. The orbital skin in both birds was slightly swollen and their eyes looked as if wearing goggles. In some pairs the orbital skin was yellow; in others, orange-yellow. While one bird incubated, the other bird would run down to the water edge and walk along it in typical plover fashion, one leg up. Alarm calls were emitted when the sentinel bird, the one that was not incubating at the time, suspected danger. Such calls were more frequent when some bird of prey flew in the vicinity of the nest. The Redheaded Merlin was a constant menace. We have observed this little falcon go for the Little Plover, particularly during its breeding season.

At the end of our work we were glad to see the pair of Little Ringed Plovers take little notice of us when we approached the nest. No sooner the hide was removed and we had moved some metres away with our backs turned than one of the birds ran to the nest and settled over the eggs. This must have given the pair some relief, for though the hide was not regarded as a dangerous object the pair must have thought it a great nuisance.

In the breeding season we often saw the courtship display of these birds. The pair would fly up into the sky emitting twittering notes, would turn sharply in the air with wings held stiffly and then chase each other. This performance would be repeated many times. One or more pairs may join in this courtship flight, which coincides with the establishment of their breeding territory.

## KENTISH PLOVER

**I**N SPITE OF its wide distribution, very little is known about this bird in India for most of our Indian ornithologists appear to have overlooked it completely until one of us found it breeding on the shores of Western India. Since then the Kentish Plover has been seen in various parts of India. The more it is recognised by bird-watchers the more we shall hear about it as being not an uncommon bird on our sea-shores and

lake-sides, estuaries and rivers. Because of its dull brown and white plumage and its diminutive size, resembling that of a Little Ringed Plover, the Kentish Plover is often overlooked. Perhaps, on account of its close resemblance to the Lesser Sand Plover, it may often have been mistaken for that species and thereby neglected. However, recognition of the two species depends upon careful observation.

The Kentish Plover has the white neck collar complete and a slender bill. The sexes are alike, but the cock Kentish Plover can be easily recognised by the black-and-white forehead and the two small black bars or spots on the sides of the upper breast. The Lesser Sand Plover is a migratory bird and the resemblance to the hen Kentish Plover is seen in its winterplumage when large number of these birds visits the coasts of India. We have seen these birds on mud flats in hundreds. Although Kentish Plovers flock together and emigrate, they are not normally seen in very large numbers. Moreover at the time when Kentish Plovers are nesting, the Lesser Sand Plovers have either left our shores or are in large migrating flocks ready to leave.

The Kentish Plover breeds on our coastal shores and we have now found it nesting on small islands and shores of fresh water tanks. The black bill and legs separate it immediately from the Jerdon's Little Ringed Plover.

In the month of May and June we had found some breeding pairs of Kentish Plovers on the seaside and on an island in a tank. The nests were small scrapings, lined with tiny shells and stones. The normal clutch is of three eggs but two are often laid. In sand or shingle the eggs are almost invisible as they become partially embedded with only the broad tops showing, otherwise they are seen quite clearly. We had selected a suitable nest for photography on a small island in a tank in which other waders were also nesting. After spending many hours in the hide and taking some photographs we observed that both parents brood and change their duties frequently during the hot hours of the day. Belly-wetting by the bird to moisten the eggs was a regular sight. When birds took over their duties of brooding, they sometimes exchanged calls but more often they performed their duty in silence. The Kentish Plovers, nevertheless, were vigilant and one bird always stood guard, emitting a warning whistle on seeing a bird of prey or a man approaching their nest. It is quick to challenge an intruder on its territory. Sometimes a duel would ensue between the male bird and the intruding bird and this was quite amusing to watch not only for us but also for Mrs. Kentish Plover.

The most interesting part of the nesting behaviour of the Kentish Plover seems to be the protection of its eggs and young, in spite of the fact that the eggs are set deeply in the ground making them difficult to discern. It is difficult for any bird or beast to find these eggs, but we have seen birds like the Great Stone Curlew pick up and swallow these eggs. So well did the Kentish Plover's eggs match the ground on which they were laid that more than once we nearly stepped on a clutch. But more often, it is the



parent bird's action that reveals a nest, for no sooner did one approach it than the bird would begin a startling display to lead one away. With fluttering wings and spreading tail, revealing its pied pattern, the bird would feign injury, often dragging itself over the ground as if wounded and in great pain. So agitated do the birds become when one approaches their nest that their behaviour itself indicates the presence of the nest nearby. And then, as one walks away from the nest, the bird suddenly stops its performance. So deeply fixed is this behaviour in the nature of this species, that it richly deserves its local name of Dhongili, meaning deceiver or pretender.

On the beaches, the Kentish Plover nests at high water mark in shingle and there it is often disturbed by high tides. On small islands, one may see scattered pairs nesting not far from each other. The common call uttered by this bird is *wit wit* and *weet-weet* and *tluiip*. The flight is low and direct. These birds are quite silent during the winter time, moving in loose flocks which are never very large. The Redheaded Merlin is a danger in the breeding season, but a greater danger comes from the domestic ungulates who are liable to invade the breeding site of the Kentish Plover and destroy its eggs by trampling. This danger also applies to other ground nesting birds breeding in the same habitat.

## KING OR BLACK VULTURE

**T**HE BLACK VULTURE gives a vivid impression of an old, bald, red-faced Colonel in dinner jacket wearing a white waistcoat. His regal look, however does not match with his behaviour as a scavenger of dead bodies.

One afternoon in March we came upon a dead dog near the roadside and on this a King Vulture had alighted and was taking his *hors-d'oeuvres*. Soon a Longbilled Vulture alighted with a thud but was not allowed to join the King. The King then commenced to eat in peace but not for long, for we saw two large winged black balls drop from the blue sky. We first thought they were Imperial Eagles coming down to intervene but as soon as they circled low with broad wings open and legs dangling we recognised them. They were Cinereous Vultures, a migratory species of large size rivalling the Griffon the biggest of our vultures. These two birds landed clumsily and as they approached the carcass of the dog, the King retreated reluctantly. The newcomers then took over, and soon everything was finished except skin and bones. Now the King could not wait any longer. He walked boldly towards the foreigners, got close enough but still dared not take a bite. Seeing the marrow-filled bones and skeleton and skin of the dog a Neophron Scavenger Vulture in juvenile plumage also arrived on the scene and waited for his turn. The camera lens was brought to bear on the vultures and we took some snaps of the scenes.

Disturbed by the clicking camera, one of the two Cinereous Vultures left the carcase and took wing.

It was in the middle of April that we found a nest of the King Vulture on an umbrella-shaped thorn tree. The nest was a large platform caving in at the centre in which one large white egg lay. We then slowly prepared ourselves for photographing the bird at its nest by building a *machan*. By the time it was ready, the chick had hatched and was growing fast. This little bare-headed prince was replica of its father without of course the dress suit and the bright red colours. The parents took good care of the nestling and we succeeded in taking some photographs. The light was very strong as the nest was on a tree quite in the open, and the sun was bright and hot. In the early morning the chick was brooded, the parent bird crouching and shading it. But strangely, as it grew warmer, the parent birds left the nest to soar into the sky though we had thought that one of them would remain at the nest. However on later observation we saw that one parent had alighted on a tree not very far away and was watching us. It was hours since the adult birds had left the nest, and the nestling was becoming impatient. We could see it moving its naked head round and stretching it up trying to make itself seen as much as possible. Finally, after many hours, one parent arrived and alighted on the nest and seeing that the chick was hungry it regurgitated some liquid into its bill in a dribbling way. The nestling swallowed the watery food spilling some of it. In the afternoon, one of the parents settled on the nest and shaded the chick, while the other brought some food. The nestling when hungry emitted a cry and kept on moving about in the nest and straining itself, looking in all directions into the sky, watching other birds and looking into its new world. However, as it grew older, it kept up a grunting sound when being fed.

The King Vultures do not breed in colony but singly on trees, often solitary ones in open country or forest, laying only one egg. At mating time the birds emit a roaring sound but are less vocal at other times. When feeding, we have not heard them chattering and screaming or throwing themselves about vulgarly, as do the commoner species. But they wait for an opening to take their share, perhaps an attribute of their kingliness.

## LARGE CORMORANT

**T**HE LARGE CORMORANT is found all over India and is a common bird where there are extensive sheets of water. The elongated neck and body and the tail are black, the bill is fairly long and hooked at the tip, the legs are short and webbed. When perched it has a vertical pose with the neck and head held in 'S' shape. The Cormorant is a water bird, most of its time being spent in fishing and sitting drying its feathers in the sun and



wind. It can be easily seen from a distance on account of its black plumage which shows up clearly in a background of water or sky. The Cormorant is generally seen in groups, some of them very large. In flight, the white flank patch is conspicuous and by this the bird is easily identified. The bird is about the size of a large domestic duck. The sexes are alike. The nests are built on trees and are made of sticks, mostly those standing in water or close to it. They are strong well-built structures and fairly deep and may last a number of years, being renovated by the Cormorants every year in the breeding season. Normally three to five eggs of pale-bluish green colour are laid.

It was in Western India in the month of October, that we received news of a colony of large Cormorants nesting on trees partly submerged in water in a small irrigation tank. And so we decided to see the birds and take some photographs from a small boat which was available, without building a hide. The colony of Cormorants had divided into four batches, making full use of all the trees which were standing in water. Some of these trees were dead and leafless, and others had leaves. By a remarkable coincidence, the motorboat which took us to the colony was also called the "Cormorant". It took us less than ten minutes to reach close to the nesting birds, and when we were about sixty metres from where they were, we switched off the motor, and began paddling slowly towards the bird colony. As we approached closer, we noticed that the Cormorants had monopolised the *Ficus* trees while some other birds were nesting on the *babul* trees. When we were about twenty metres from the colony all the Cormorants began calling at once. They extended their necks upwards and raised themselves from their nests as if ready to take off. When we were about fifteen metres from them, suddenly half of the group took wing, diving slightly downwards and then flapping low over the water. The rest of them flew away as we moved a little closer. As the nests were high we could not see what was in them, but from the fact that some birds were sitting we surmised that most of the nests contained eggs or small young. Then we moved slowly towards the adjoining trees. Here, we found that Little Egrets, Pond Herons, Cattle Egrets, Large White Egrets, Snake Birds or Darters, Ring Doves, White-throated Munias, a pair of Spoonbills were nesting. It was a noisy colony, with the nests of the Cormorants mostly placed on the tops and sides of the trees. These were bulky in comparison with those of the Egrets. There was much squawking and billing by the Egrets as we approached them and we saw the little White Egret raise its long white plumes. These plumes were once highly valued for export, which incidentally caused wholesale destruction of these birds. The Egrets looked so clean and handsome in their immaculate white plumage. What a contrast it presented with the glossy greenish black plumage of the Cormorants. The presence of the Egrets in the colony broke the dark monotony created by the Cormorants.

As we finished taking photographs, some Cormorants started to return to their nests, wings held back and flapping to break their speed, and the legs well extended forward for landing. They alighted clumsily. With their heads held high, they would start calling and flapping their wing all of

a sudden. On our way back, we saw the Cormorants feeding in deep water. A group of them diving and bringing to the surface fish about fifteen centimetres long. The Cormorant is known to fish in company, driving shoals of fish into shallow water by swimming in a line or semi-circle and catching the fish as they try to escape. In the East, Cormorant is trained to catch fish.

Sometimes the Cormorants fly long distances in search of food and return to their nests or roosts after feeding in the morning or at sunset as the case may be. A group of Cormorants make swishing sound as they glide down to land on water with a splash. In the breeding season the pouch is seen to be enlarged being often full of fish. When feeding the young the parent bird opens its bill wide and allows the young to place its head into the pouch and eat. The full-fledged juvenile birds have the upper parts brown and the lower parts white. Year after year the same trees or rock cavities are used for nesting and they become white with the foul excreta of the birds.

Although the Cormorant flies in 'V' formation when going long distances, it flies in an irregular manner when disturbed from its breeding colony or roost. We have seen birds flying in single file and not in a straight line following the course of a river; also we have seen them flying in a line, though somewhat unevenly. They fly low over water but take height when flying far.

## LESSER FLORICAN

**T**HE LESSER FLORICAN is a miniature bustard of the size of a domestic hen. Although found in most parts of India—in Eastern India it has been replaced by a larger Florican known as the Bengal Florican—it is not commonly seen, being rather a shy bird and seasonal in its habits. It is a local migrant, visiting areas where rainfall is not excessive and yet is sufficient for the rapid growth of grass and crops in which it breeds. It is, therefore, a monsoon bird. The male or cock bird is very handsome during the breeding season which commences with the rains at the end of June and lasts till the end of the monsoon in October. The cock Florican assumes a pied plumage, a dress which he displays in a fascinating manner. The disproportionately large head has on its sides black hair-like plumes which end in club shape. These auricular feathers grow during the breeding season. The purpose of these feathers is not known but they certainly enhance the beauty of the male. The long legs are yellowish coloured and ideally suited for walking and running. The mantle is marked with black arrow heads on a golden-brown surface. The tail is banded and has greyish and rufescent markings. The white band which commences close to the base of the black neck extends downwards into the wing coverts.



The hen Florican is a contrast to the cock. She has a golden and brown dress. The lower parts are pale buffy-white, the upper parts being marked much like the cock but lighter. She has no auricular plumes, but she averages slightly larger in size. The males, after the breeding season is over, lose their black suits and ear plumes, and resemble the female except for some of the white wing coverts.

It was soon after the first monsoon rains and the green grass had sprouted. The fields had been sown and the crops had come up. Rainfall had stopped, and the sky overcast with low monsoon clouds rendered even lighting over the open country. The cock Floricans had arrived and were hiding amongst hedges and long grass demarcating the fields. The grass had not grown long enough to give them much protection, but all the same the birds entered it to feed on grasshoppers and other insect life that had emerged. We made for a termite-hill on some high ground and having reached it we sat down and listened. Soon we heard a croak, much like that of a frog, in the distance. We knew the sound was made by the cock Florican as it jumped quickly into the air in its song flight. The sound was faint but sure enough it came from the Florican. The call was repeated and we spotted the caller through our binoculars as he leaped up. He executed a number of these leaps as we watched him. While listening we also caught the sound of another cock croaking, and soon we realised that there were at least three to four birds within hearing distance. We then slowly approached the bird which was calling closest to us, stopping now and then to see that he was still there. No sooner, however, he realised that we were coming in his direction than he stopped calling and quietly crept into cover near a hedge. We moved closer and sat down behind a bush and watched with our binoculars. After some time we sighted the head of the cock Florican at about two hundred metres from us. He then slowly raised his head and neck and after lowering it crept some metres away only to show himself again. This time we could see his black ear plumes through the binoculars. Soon he was convinced that we were of no harm and he stood erect and listened with neck outstretched. In a moment he jumped up flapping his wings rapidly. Within a split second, he was parachuting downwards with legs dangling, the wings slightly apart about to strike the earth. He then skilfully landed on his toes and stood erect after recovering from his descent. The whole display lasted not more than a second or two, at the most. The height to which he leapt was not more than 1 to 1.5 metres. It was a remarkable performance. We watched him keep up this display for over twenty minutes, then it suddenly stopped.

He had commenced to feed, walking a few steps and slowly creeping up to some insect and then with a lightning stab of his sharp bill catch it before it could fly. At times he would jump up and catch an insect that he had flushed. We also saw him run quickly to catch an insect which had evaded the first attempt at being caught. After his feed, he would stop, rest a while and then move up a little and begin jumping and calling all over again. It seemed he was establishing his territory by walking

all over it and displaying. It was difficult to say how much the area was. It could easily be from 1.2 to 2.5 square kilometre. The ground at which a Florican constantly displays is hardened, and eventually stands out as a bare patch in the midst of thick and tall grass. This patch may be a small square and is known to villagers as *akhali*.

Sometimes, we would see a hen Florican flying with slow wing beats low over the fields and grass patches, and suddenly we would hear all the cock birds in the vicinity calling repeatedly, each one in the hope of attracting her to his territory. We would even see a female Florican alight close to a male, then take off and land in another male's territory. Female Floricans are, however, less in evidence than the males. It was seldom that we saw a hen bird feeding. And yet, when we watched those fields where the males were to be found, we invariably saw a female flying over them at dusk. The cock Floricans, though allowing close enough approach, are in the habit of walking quickly out of sight when approached. It was, therefore, difficult to photograph them except in extensive grassland where they had established their *akhali*s and were wont to come regularly. Because of the pugnacious nature of the cock Florican, we knew that if a male decoy was placed in view of a cock which was calling, he would immediately attack it and would like to drive it out from his territory. We prepared a cock Florican decoy and placed it in the same field in which a cock was jumping. The reaction was immediate. As the cock Florican jumped he noticed the decoy although the latter was stationary and at a distance of about eighty metres. That he should have noticed his pseudo rival within a second or two of his jump seemed to us extraordinary, as most birds and animals are unable to discern motionless objects unless they are very conspicuous. The decoy was placed amongst long grass but in an open space, and to us it did not seem at all conspicuous. Yet the pied pattern of the decoy had attracted the bird.

The cock came closer and challenged the decoy by jumping and calling about forty metres from it. Seeing that there was no response he literally ran towards the decoy and stood about ten metres from it, eyeing the hide, which was placed nearby, suspiciously. The bird looked at the decoy for a few minutes, hesitated because his rival made no movement, and then charged at the decoy attacking it vigorously at the head and neck with his sharply pointed bill. The first round lasted about five seconds; then the bird stopped for a moment to take a brief rest after which the attack was resumed. After the fifth round the decoy collapsed to the ground and the Florican still in frenzy pecked at it viciously. Then satisfied that he had defeated his opponent he stood erect and marched past the hide like an army officer.

After a while, he returned to see if the decoy was there. Being satisfied that there was now no rival left, he resumed his jumping and croaking as before.

The hen Floricans start laying as early as July but most eggs are found in August and September and even as late as October if the monsoon rains



are late. The normal clutch contains four to five eggs, though as many as six eggs have been recorded. The nest is a mere depression in the grass, the hen scratching a slight depression in the ground before the eggs are laid. The site may be in open grassland or in a field of millet.

The eggs of the Florican are roundish ovals. They vary in colour from olive-brown to almost sea-green with a few splashes of reddish brown. The normal colour is olive-green. The most interesting time we had photographing the Florican's nest was when some eggs had hatched in a nest in grass close to a thorny bush. The grass had grown quite tall and taking a photograph was quite a problem. The hide had to be brought close to the nest and some of the grass had to be bent; even then it was difficult to obtain a clear picture of the scene. No sooner had the hide been moved up than the mother Florican was wild. She puffed her feathers out in aggressive manner and stood over her two chicks and the two unhatched eggs. She would dart forward and then retreat a step or two. As she stood she emitted a whistle-like cry. The sound resembled that of air passing through a crack of a window in a strong gale and varied in intensity; it sounded quite sinister. Then finding that her demonstration was of no avail, she spread out one wing, hiding her head and body and attempted the broken-wing-ruse before slinking away from the nest. The chicks were fawn and striped with black, the moustachial streak being conspicuous. The egg-tooth on the bill was visible. The two chicks did not seem frightened and did not know exactly what to do. One disappeared into the bush. They were hardly dry from the egg and yet were able to walk though rather unsteadily. A pole which we had kept in the hide to strike a snake in case it should creep under it was brought into action. It was shot forward towards the hen bird to lay some of the grass down which had risen and was obstructing the view for taking a clear photograph. No sooner this was done than the hen rushed forward and attacked the staff with her bill. The movement was too rapid to photograph. So we allowed her to retreat and then took a snap of her in an aggressive pose after which she retreated further and sat down with her head and neck poised like a snake ready to strike. All the time she kept her bill pointing straight at the lens. After taking some more pictures we covered the two eggs and chicks with the standing grass and left the mother Florican in peace.

The Florican is shot during its breeding season, which is a pity. Owing to the conspicuous plumage and display of the cock Florican it is easily located and shot. In other seasons the Florican is difficult to find. Unfortunately, however, it is snared by nomadic tribes in and out of its breeding time.

## LITTLE GREBE OR DABCHICK

**T**HE DABCHICK IS an aquatic bird spending most of its time in water. About the size of a Partridge, the Little Grebe is literally a ball of soft feathers with a protruding head of chestnut-red colour. A greenish white spot near the gape is conspicuous and the blood-red eyes may be visible at close quarters. The bill is black, sharp and pointed. The legs are lobed and of greenish colour. The wings have a white patch on them and this is seen clearly during flight.

The Dabchick is found throughout India and is a local migrant. During the monsoon the bird may be seen in rainwater pools where there are reeds and aquatic plants. It may be seen in small and large sheets of fairly deep water in which it breeds. The breeding season may be a prolonged one depending upon local conditions and rains, the usual time being from June to September. The nest is a floating pad of soft aquatic vegetation anchored to some reed or plant in water. Both sexes help in building the nest bringing the material from the surface and bottom of water. Four to six and sometimes seven white eggs are laid and these become stained yellowish-buff colour. Both sexes incubate. The male cannot be differentiated from the female in appearance. The eggs are concealed by a pad of aquatic plants when the sitting bird covers them as she leaves the nest.

The main enemy of the Dabchick is the House Crow which steals its eggs if the nest is left open. Not always does the Little Grebe cover its eggs before leaving the nest and this is specially noticed when crows are not present. It was during the monsoon while we were out searching for Lesser Frigatebirds that we came upon a small rainwater pool which had patches of reeds on its sides. Here we found a nest of the Little Grebe with five fresh eggs. This was a good opportunity for photographing the bird at its nest as the nest itself was not more than six metres from the side of the pool. It was amidst a patch of reeds and could hardly be seen and so we had to remove a good deal of the reeds in order to see the nest more clearly before taking photographs of the sitting bird. The hide was placed on the side of the pool and we were able to photograph the bird at its nest the very same day after waiting patiently for some hours until the bird had lost its fear of the camera lens. The greyish-brown breast and flanks with the white abdomen was clearly seen as the bird crept out of the water to settle on its eggs. The Little Grebe looked much larger on the nest than when swimming. We found it to be fairly cautious while approaching the nest, raising only its head above water to have a good look around before it fully emerged to the surface.

The Little Grebe is a playful bird diving and swimming frequently. Just before mating time a pair of birds may be seen swiftly flying over the water as if running on the surface and then diving one after the other. The birds call frequently during the breeding season. The young after hatching are able to swim and are often carried on their parents' backs. They are



striped when young, becoming light greyish brown as they grow older. They are very active and a family of Grebes with their young call out to each other noisily. We have noticed that young Dabchicks soon after they are hatched are open to the danger of being caught by the Whitebreasted Kingfisher, as we have seen the latter dive and capture the young. In winter the Dabchick changes into a greyish-brown plumage losing the bright colours of the head. It is a fascinating bird to watch being active most of the time. In flight the wing beats are rapid and the bird has to take a long run on the surface of the water before taking to the air. Migration takes place by night, and this is a factor for its survival as its flight is comparatively weak. Should it attempt to migrate during the day, it would invariably be killed by birds of prey owing to lack of manoeuvrability in the air.

During the hot weather when rainwater pools and tanks are liable to become dry, the Dabchick emigrates to perennial sources of water such as large lakes and rivers. We have seen it breeding in large sheets of water during the hot weather, as also during the winter through this is less common. In the dry season we have found hundreds of Little Grebes congregating on lakes or sheets of water preparing for dispersal with the coming of the rains. During the monsoon the Little Grebe spreads over the country and is well distributed. Small and deep rainwater pools thickly planted with aquatic vegetation form ideal habitats for it to breed in. A number of pairs may breed in one jheel though not very close to each other and we have found as many as twenty nests on one stretch of water of about 8,000 square metres, all the nests being found along the edges, not far from the land.

## LITTLE TERN OR TERNLET

**T**HE TERNLET, as its name signifies, is a miniature tern, smaller than the Blackbellied Tern. There are a number of species found in India, and it is not always easy to distinguish them in the field. The Ternlet, particularly at breeding time, is easily identified by its white forehead and black cap, its yellow bill which is tipped black, and its fleshy to orange-brown legs, grey upper parts and white lower parts. The short tail is whitish. In winter, the crown is mottled, the legs more dusky, and the bill becomes darker. The Ternlet is often seen flying over water searching for food or settled on some bank on the riverside, lake or seashore.

When photographing the River and Blackbellied Terns we also found a nest of the Little Tern on a sandy islet of the river. At first it was difficult to find the nest, as the bird suddenly flew straight up into the sky as soon as it saw us from a distance approaching its nest. However, we had raised our binoculars before it did so. We surmised that it was brooding. By the

time we reached the islet in a boat, the Little Tern had ringed up high and was not so agitated as we had expected it to be. It did not call incessantly like the other terns, but kept on flying in circles, uttering a short call at intervals. We then searched the piece of isolated sandbank and were about to give up, when we found the nest which contained two eggs. They were of a greyish-sandy colour splashed with light brown markings. The nest was merely a depression in the sand, made by the birds turning round in a circle and kicking the sand out. It was a nest circular depression though small in size, enough to fit the two eggs. The pair which we observed at the nest, though shy in the beginning, did not make much fuss when we photographed it at the nest and was quite obliging. The sexes are alike and both birds took part in incubating the eggs. We found the Ternlet a fast flier having a rapid wing beat, which reminded us of a small falcon, although it varied its wing strokes to suit its purpose. When disturbed from the nest, the bird would ascend quickly into the air in spirals, calling intermittently and flying fairly fast. After watching us leave the nest, the bird would suddenly drop down and alight right on to the nest, an action which could not be easily photographed. Almost as swiftly, it would rise from the nest. As with the other terns, a brooding bird would call to its mate which occasionally brought a small fish to feed it. Evidently it was the male that did this, as during the courtship, it entices the female to accept food. Only fresh and wet fish, usually silvery, are accepted. The Little Tern fished in the same manner as the other terns, diving almost perpendicularly into the water. Although all the three varieties of terns the River, the Blackbellied and the Little were seen fishing in the same waters, none seemed to clash with the other. Food was plentiful and there were at least half a dozen pairs of the Little Terns breeding in the vicinity. We did not find a colony, though we have seen breeding colonies on islands of lakes and close to the seashore. They are then quite noisy when their nests are approached. Unfortunately their eggs are sometimes robbed by men, or trampled by domestic livestock.

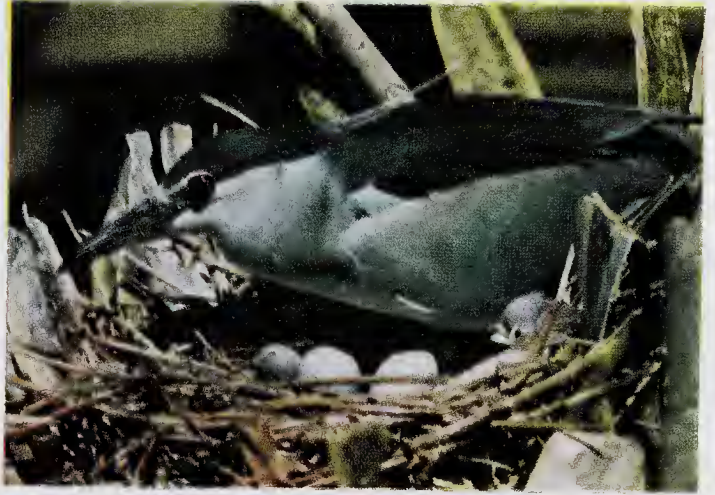
## MARSHALL'S IORA

**M**ALE IORAS ARE, dimorphic. During the breeding season, they assume a black brown and wings, and tails also of the same colour with a mixture of white in them. The lower plumage is a bright yellow from chain to vent. Bill and legs are greyish blue. The females are lemon yellow all over, with much black and white in the wings. Out of the breeding season the males lose their nuptial feathers and start looking like the females.

The whereabouts of a pair of loras, for they always seem to go about in couples even out of the breeding season, is revealed by a harsh sparrow-like *churr* uttered from time to time as the birds keep in contact with one



*Night Heron at nest in daytime*



*Jerdon's Little Ringed Plover about to settle on eggs*





*Indian Rose-ringed Parakeet at bird-bath*



*Indian Treepie and two Mynas at bird-bath*





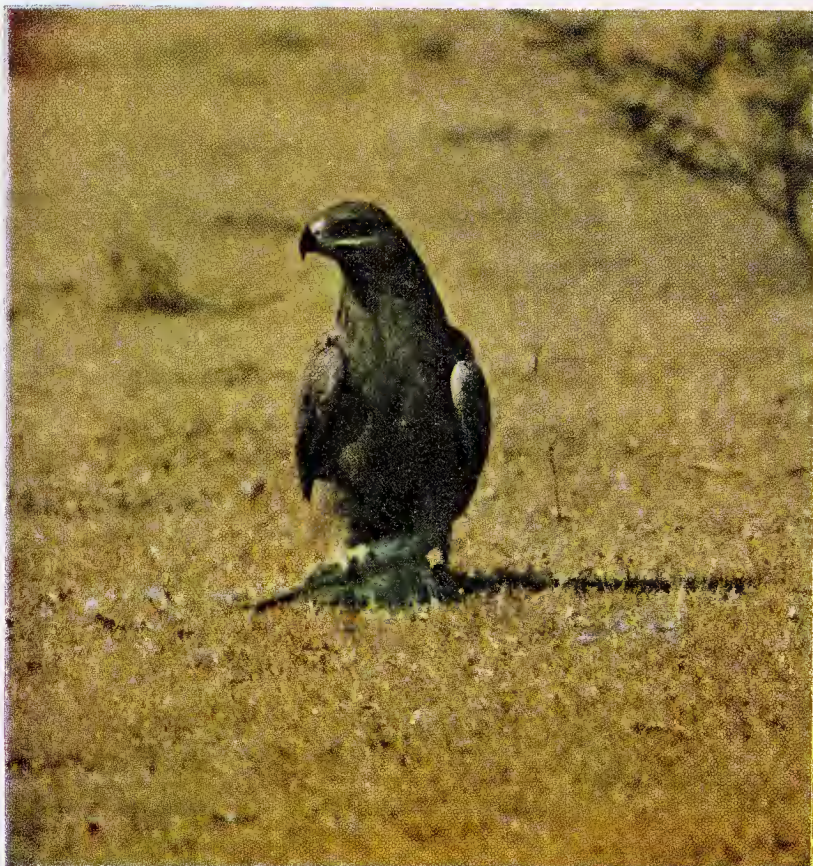
*Kentish Plover pair at nest*



*A pair of Ternlets*



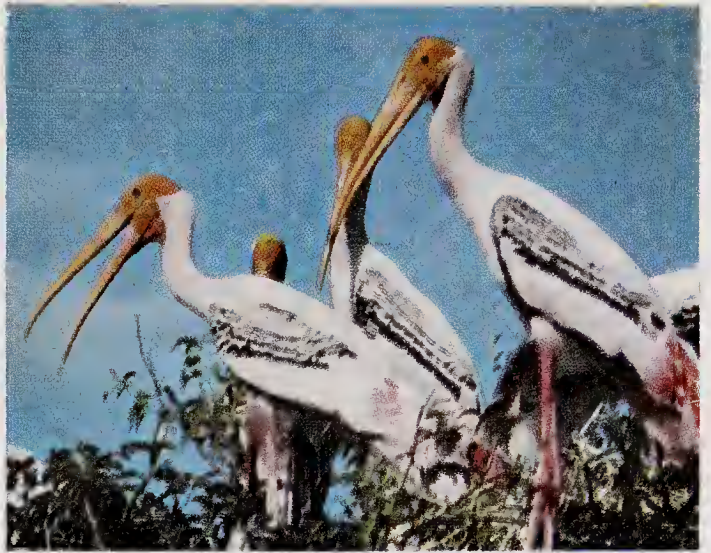
*Indian Tawny  
Eagle on prey*



*A pair of Short-Toed Eagles at nest*



*Painted Storks—Keep  
away please*



*Large Indian Cormorants nesting*



*Spotbills in the  
reeds nesting*



*Little Tern  
settling on eggs*



*Redwattled  
Lapwing at nest*



*Indian Skimmer*



*Cock Lesser Frigate on the attack*





*Indian Stone Curlew nesting in a field*



*Small Indian Pratincole incubating*



another. With a little investigation the dumpy little bird is discovered often hopping from branch to branch, turning round twigs to hang head down while prying open some leaf, or examining a spray of tight round heads of yellow acacia flowers in search of insects.

During the hot weather and the rains, when the lora breeds, the cock emits a variety of loud musical whistles of which the most oft repeated is a liquid *shaubingi*, hence the Hindi name, and a long drawn out *weeetu-weeetu-weeetu*. At this season, the cock displays in his territory by flying up into the air, with feathers fluffed and then expanding his tail he glides down spirally to a perch looking like a black and yellow ball of feathers; during the display he utters a harsh *krrr*. Usually, with the first shower of rain the lora turns to nest-building, a task performed mainly by the hen while the cock flies after her calling and displaying all the while.

The nest is a deep well-built cup of fibres, smeared with cobwebs on the outside and placed in the crotch of a branch or fork varying in height above the ground from a metre to three to five metres. Apparently a conspicuous object, we have found it always a difficult nest to locate especially when the rains cause the white cobwebs on the outside of the nest to get dirtied leaving it brown and inconspicuous among the green new foliage. The average clutch of eggs is three; they are finely speckled. Both parents incubate, taking turns throughout the day. At night, we have often observed the hen incubating. Since the parents share the irksome duty of incubation the cock seldom feeds the hen while doing so. The young are tended by both parents each coming separately or together to feed them. Noting the timing of their visits to the nest during one photographic session, we discovered that both birds came approximately three times in fifteen minutes. The food brought consisted entirely of insects, chiefly small green grubs and caterpillars.

We spent more delightful hours photographing this bird. The hide was a crude affair, hiding really nothing and that too at a metre's distance. The gap for the camera and for us to peer through was too large and revealed all movements inside, yet nothing worried the busy parents. It was a remarkable experience which gave a tremendous thrill to us and we were glad that a great measure of security was afforded to the birds by the very closeness of the hide which prevented feathered predators from intruding. As for repelling snakes and lizards, we had liberally smeared the branch lower down with motor grease. We were happy to see the lora couple leave their home safe and for days afterwards the musical call of the cock and the eager chirps of the fledglings reassured us that the family was alive. Unfortunately, the cock had lost most of his breeding plumage as it was late in the season.

## NIGHT HERON

IN SUMMER, soon after sunset, one may hear a short harsh *wak* and looking up may see a bird or a small group of birds passing overhead in silhouette. This sound may be repeated at intervals. It means that the Night Herons' day has begun and that they are flying from their roosts in some foliaged grove of trees to their feeding grounds at some waterside. These birds fly singly in succession or in small flocks, neither very high nor very low. We have watched them pass over us while sitting on a lawn or while driving back home late in the evening. We have heard them in the dark while lying awake at night on our beds and we have seen their dark shapes on moonlit nights as they winged over us flying straight as if their path had been marked in the sky, and in haste as if rushing to keep an engagement. We have seen them returning on the same route before dawn.

In daylight, the Night Heron is easily identified by the grey and buff-white body with the black crest and back, which glisten dark bottle-green in the sunlight, and the pale orange-yellow to greenish yellow legs and blackish yellow bill of the adult bird. In juvenile plumage, the bird is totally different, being khaki-brown and striped brown on the breast, the facial skin being yellowish green. During the day, the Night Heron spends its time sitting quietly in the shade, sleeping or resting. When flushed, a group of birds may fly in short circles and seek cover close at hand or settle back in the same tree when danger has passed. They breed during the rains. When in courtship they raise their slender long white feathers of the crest which are lying on the nape almost concealed. The sexes are alike. The bird makes a stick-nest, not very large nor in any way lavish. The birds nest in colony, sometimes accompanied by other water birds, in trees and shrubs either on land or in water. We have seen them roosting on trees in cities and villages. We have watched them standing hunchbacked in the rain, the drops rolling down their heads and backs. While photographing the bird at the nest we realised how handsome the bird was with its grey and white and dark greenish glossy plumage and the conspicuous blood red eyes. The eggs are beautiful deep blue. The head looks large, and when the bird stands hunched the head and neck merge with the body. Although shy, they permit close approach and we have passed close to them in a boat while they were roosting amidst thorny trees covered by creepers standing in water. In such habitats we found them nesting quite near to each other. The bird mostly feeds on fish and aquatic animal life found at the waterside.



## PAINTED PARTRIDGE OR FRANCOLIN

THE PAINTED PARTRIDGE is what we may call a brother of the Black Partridge and Grey Partridge, and all three can be described as Francolins. The three species are among the finest game birds of India and their meat is considered a delicacy. The Painter, as the Painted Partridge is often called by sportsmen, is closely related in appearance and behaviour to the Black Partridge but is less good-looking than the latter.

The Black Partridge avoids dry areas, but the Painter thrives on them. The Painted and the Grey Partridges, on the other hand, seek similar country and climate. They prefer grasslands and are found in scrub, crops and deciduous forest. The Painted Partridge has no vocabulary of call notes but the one he normally sounds, proclaiming his domain and challenging rivals, is a *kick-kickerry* or *kick-kiri-kickerry*. This pleasing though harsh call reverberates to a considerable distance specially during the cool hours. We have even heard it during moonlit nights. This call is frequently heard during the breeding season in the rains and also at other times of the year. They breed mostly during the rains. The cock bird when calling prefers to stand on a high vantage spot from where he can see and hear better and from where he can relay his song over a greater distance. Thus we have seen him on tops of trees, telegraph posts, termite mounds and bushes calling in his characteristic manner. When calling he stretches himself up and with head facing the sky he utters his trisyllable song, jerking his head backwards while doing so. Having called, he waits to listen to rival calls and then repeats himself. In the breeding season, the song attracts hens, yet we are not sure whether the bird is polygynous or not.

The Painter is not much of a fighter although we have seen two males sparring at each other and even jumping up to attack, but this posture does not last long. Spurless, unlike the Grey Partridge, the Painter relies more on his charm than on force in wooing his spouse, yet he is not reluctant to defend his territory or favourite post by force if necessary.

The Painted Partridge is not quite as good a runner as the Grey Partridge, but it is always on its feet and depends a great deal upon camouflage to conceal itself. It feeds at dusk and, where unmolested, walks with an erect posture and tail up, reminiscent of a hen. The bird feeds on insects, fruits, seeds and green vegetation of various kinds. We have seen them devour large black ants profusely. On the whole it is a silent and shy bird, running away when disturbed like a waterhen. The flight is short and rapid and the bird is recognised by its black barred chestnut wings and blackish tail. The bird flies low over hedges and bushes and when pursued by hawks turns in the air with head and neck slightly raised and crest up. When alarmed it raises its crown feathers and sometimes utters a hoarse call.

At the time when we were photographing the Lesser Florican some members

of a nomadic tribe informed us of a nest and eggs of the Painted Partridge near a field of millet. The nest was situated in grass and contained eggs of a buffish colour, and were stained like those of a Little Grebe. The hen was sitting tight and was hardly visible as the green grass covered the entire bird and nest, and the deceptive pattern of the bird blended with the stems and shade of the grass that covered it. We could have stepped right on the bird as we were approaching; it was so still. The problem was how to put the hen off the nest without scaring it. We employed a dog and the bird suddenly flew off the nest as it saw the animal. It did not, however, take long for the bird to realise that the dog was of no real danger. And the bird kept moving back to the nest. We were able to take some photographs of the bird at the nest.

The chicks of the Painted Partridge are even more difficult to find than the eggs and this bird rarely, if at all, brings its young to the roadside as we have seldom seen them while motoring. As we searched the grass we found one chick. It was light rufous-brown with a broad dark reddish brown coronal band or stripe and three blackish stripes on the downy upper parts; the fleshy legs were reddish yellow. The chick was active and it soon ran into the grass and hid itself. We waited. And then we heard it emit a cricket-like call which if we had not known we would have mistaken for the song of a cricket or that of a Redwinged Bush-Lark. The hen, when flushed, utters a chuckling *trr* or *turr* to distract attention from its eggs, dropping into cover close by. To our knowledge the hen alone incubates and we have never seen both parents with their young at any one time.

The Painted Partridge, though fairly common in our country, is becoming scarce as its natural habitat of grassland and thorny bushes is being destroyed with the extension of cultivation.

## PAINTED STORK

**T**HE PAINTED STORK stands about a metre and has a long slightly downward curved bill ending in a point. The bill is yellow but becomes bright orange during the breeding season ; so does the facial skin. The pale fleshy legs also assume a bright pink lustre in the breeding season and are often spoiled by its own excreta. The head and neck are white as are the breast and back though on the breast there is a conspicuous blackish green band mixed with white. As its name signifies, this stork is really painted, and the combination of black, green, white and pink colours on its skin makes it a beautiful bird.

The Painted Stork is found throughout India, often close to water. It may be found in flocks, in pairs, or singly, and we have seen it associating



in large flocks of over two hundred birds when feeding in shallow *jheels* and rivers. It is also found frequently on the seaside where its favourite food, the mud-skipper and crab, is found. The Painted Stork feeds on a large variety of live and dead aquatic food and insect life. Its manner of feeding is interesting. It enjoys searching for food in muddy or dirty water wading sometimes breast-deep in water and lunging forward with neck, stretched out and bill partly open. Anything alive which contacts the innerside of its razor-sharp mandibles, is immediately caught and with an upward movement of the bill the prey is swallowed. The Painted Stork makes much use of its legs in flushing aquatic life which may be hiding at the bottom. A large gathering of Storks may be seen fishing in an organised manner in shallow murky water.

During courtship, the wings are spread wide over the back and the head is either depressed, arched or raised pointing skywards. There is much of billing and clapping of mandibles.

The Painted Stork nests in colony, generally from August to December, building its platform-like nest of branches and twigs on large trees. We have found the Painted Stork building its nest on trees amidst villages and even towns and we have seen it nesting on the same tree for years together. It is a magnificent sight to see a colony of Painted Storks in full plumage on one tree.

The eggs of the Painted Stork are buffy white in colour and rather longish. Three to five eggs are laid. The nestlings soon after they hatch are snowy white becoming greyish as they become older. The juvenile birds have brown upper parts, head and neck being dark and the lower parts buffy white. The bill and legs of the juvenile bird are pale and not bright like those of the adult bird. At an early stage the nestlings are shaded from the sun by the parents standing over them with their wings spread. They are generally fed during the cool hours and at night, the parents regurgitating food at the nest. The nestlings appear to be rather impatient about food, and keep begging and crying out for food as soon as their parents alight on the nest.

In flight the Painted Stork has rather a jerky movement, and though the neck and legs are kept stretched out, part of the neck is often seen to be slightly bent. The black primaries are conspicuous from a distance. When the birds are frightened they lean well forward before taking to wing and gain height easily and immediately. The adult birds are generally silent and though they may be seen soaring high in the sky, they prefer to bask on the ground sitting on their tarsi or lying down flat on the ground, often in ploughed fields and away from water. On the whole the Painted Stork is not a shy bird and allows fairly close approach while it is feeding.

## PAINTED SPURFOWL

AS THE NAME signifies this fowl-like bird has spurs on its legs. The cock bird generally has two on each leg and even three while the hen has one or sometimes two. The cock bird is a handsome partridge-like bird and when seen in bright light may compete in beauty with some of the pheasants. His colours mainly consist of chestnut and old gold with a green metallic sheen on the wing coverts and tail. The upper plumage is covered with white spotted markings bordered with black. Thus he has some resemblance to the bright coloured Tragopan male pheasants of the Himalayas. This coloration of the cock bird is inconspicuous in light and shade of the forest in which it lives. The hen bird is almost a uniform dark olive-brown with a moustachial pale stripe near the gape; not an attractive bird at all and blends perfectly with the natural background. Unlike the Red Spurfowl, the Painted Spurfowl has no bare skin round the eyes and cheeks. The bill and legs are a dull horny-brown or olive-grey.

We have seen this bird in the deciduous forests of Madhya Pradesh and in South and Eastern India in hilly wooded terrain. It is, however, found in most parts of peninsular India and seems quite at home in the most arid rocky country composed of shallow ravines and stunted forest, too dry and hot for Jungle Fowl and yet it is found in plateau and evergreen thickets in the same biotopes in which the Red and Grey Jungle Fowls and also the Red Spurfowls are seen. It is therefore difficult to draw a line of its distribution specially within the habitats of these species. Nevertheless, it prefers a habitat which the Jungle Fowls find too sparse and hot and in country full of boulders, rocks and ravines which the Red Spurfowl seems to shun. We have seen it in burnt forest in Bamboo and in the moist deciduous forests of South India and the drier forests of Chandrapur in Maharashtra and even in Sal forests of Central and Eastern India as far as Orissa. But it was in Rajasthan, when visiting the ancient fort of Ranthambhor in Sawai Madhopur range that one of the authors (Shri Dharmakumarsinhji) saw it.

While climbing up a hillside full of rock amongst trees of *Anogeissus* mixed with a few other species, he heard a sharp clucking fowl-like call and soon saw a sombre coloured bird rush across his path with its wings and tail spread as if wounded and clucking, almost tripping over him. It was a hen Painted Spurfowl and it crossed several times before him attempting to draw him away or cause confusion. Realizing that the bird had its young, the author looked around and moved in the opposite direction leaving the path and soon saw the cock bird creeping away followed by two chicks. No sooner had the cock realized that the author had seen it and intended to follow it, than the cock quickly emitted an alarm call and escaped into a dark ravine closeby. He thus learnt of the parental care of the pair which he had taken by surprise. The chicks had obviously frozen in their tracks and were invisible, hidden amidst the strewn stones. The



hen was again in front of the author but this time watching him from behind a boulder. The author sat down and carefully arranged his camera from behind a large boulder and waited patiently for the cock bird to return. After spending some time he was rewarded by the bird returning near the chicks and he was lucky to press the trigger of his camera as it stood in a patch of bright sunlight; for, as soon as it heard the click of the camera, it vanished as silently as it had come without attracting its young. Further waiting was useless but he had got a splendid picture of the cock bird in its bright plumage. As he felt he was too close to the young; he moved away for some time and when he returned the chicks had disappeared.

The Painted Spurfowl breeds from February to June and even during the monsoon, in the drier parts of the country. It lays two to five eggs of buff colour much like the eggs of the '*Deshi Murghi*' but slightly more oval. The nest is a scrape under a rock or in a bamboo brake often on a hillside. The hen alone incubates but both parents take care of the young, guarding them assiduously and feigning injury when danger threatens.

The Painted Spurfowl appears to thrive even where grass and undergrowth are scanty provided there are abundant rocks with a canopy of trees, and where the ground is fairly steep and hilly. The birds go to water regularly. The author has seen them in typical Tiger—Sambhar country in Central and North-West India. In parts of the Shivpuri forests (M. P.) where the country is undulating and flat with numerous ravines, the birds have been seen on roads and rocky beds of dry rivulets. They have also been seen in Teak and in Sal and Bamboo forests in various parts of the country. The Painted Spurfowl is usually seen in pairs although family coveys may sometimes mix where food is abundant. Like the Chukor it likes to run uphill and fly downhill when hard pressed. The Painted Spurfowl is a fast walker, stopping now and then to look round, and is adept at negotiating rocky ground by hopping from rock to rock. It is not really very shy, but prefers seclusion and is more silent than the Red Spurfowl. Seldom has the author heard it calling even during the breeding time. The bird feeds on insects, seeds and wild fruits and is mostly seen during the early morning or late evening. Yet it can tolerate heat also and has been seen on roads much later in the morning and early afternoons unlike other jungle fowls. The bird has good eyesight and hearing and hence seldom offers an opportunity to be watched, scampering into cover or hiding behind a stone until one has passed. The bird in spite of its wariness does not seem to be prolific and cannot be said to be abundant. Painted Spurfowls do not flock also. The author has noticed that they keep to a certain territory and one may find pairs scattered with their family members. Ground predators are a real threat to them.

## PURPLE SUNBIRD

**T**ROPICAL BIRDS ARE acclaimed for their multicolour representatives. Among these, the hummingbirds of the American tropics and the sunbirds of Africa and Tropical Asia are justly described as living jewels. Their iridescent colours are a treat to the eyes as the birds flash from one flower to another in search of nectar. India possesses a large variety of lovely sunbirds. The Purple Sunbird is one of the more common species found in the plains. This species is a bird of cultivation, scrub and forest.

The males, a few inches long, assume a metallic purple-blue-black plumage when entering the breeding season. They are constantly seen on the wing, chasing one another or fluttering pugnaciously with wings quivering while seated or in the air. Their song is monotonous. The slightly downward curved bill is well adapted for probing flowers and catching small insects and spiders. We have seen them gaily flying after small flies. The females are olive brown above with dark wing coverts and pale yellow below. In non-breeding garb the adult male can be recognised by a broad blackish stripe from chin to vent on a yellow breast. The young are like the adult female but have a brighter yellow on the lower parts.

The nest is a remarkable pendant structure of cobwebs and soft material with an entrance on the side. Invariably a small roof overhangs the entrance. The nest may be suspended at the end of a branch in a thorny rose bush about a metre off the ground or on a higher tree where it looks like a mass of cobwebs that festoon many mango trees. The Sunbird sometimes enters houses and uses the wires suspending electric bulbs from the verandah ceiling as supports to hang its nest from.

Though generally they nest fairly low down, we had found a nest of this species quite high up in a ficus tree and we wished to photograph it. For this purpose the hide had to be erected on a scaffold and the construction was entrusted to the garden overseer. When ready to start work, we were horrified to find the nest only 45 centimetres from the camera opening. At first we decided to move back to the usual one metre but before doing so, we wanted to see the reaction of the parents to the camera with its supplementary close-up lenses. Undauntedly, the female came and fed her nestlings with small white spiders that are commonly found inside flowers. The male after wasting much time also began coming regularly. It is difficult to describe the thrill of watching this living gem, free and at ease from so close a distance. Truly such experiences amply repay a bird photographer's often back-breaking task of patient waiting. We found that the Treepie was a constant menace to this species while nesting. After watching the hen sunbird build a nest and lay eggs, the Treepie promptly tears open the nest and swallows the sunbird eggs. We have seen Purple Sunbirds re-nesting three times in one breeding season, each time their nests had been pilfered.



## REDVENTED BULBUL

**A**NOTHER COMMON BIRD of the Indian countryside is the Redvented Bulbul found equally plentiful in garden, cultivation and forest. Its cheery call is heard everywhere and its jaunty behaviour has carved for it a permanent place in the hearts of all who know it. As it is well known it will suffice to say that it has a short black crest on the head and a red patch at the vent; the upper parts are brownish-grey and edged with white; the lower parts are whitish; the tail is brown but tipped white, a conspicuous white rump when seen in flight completes its attire. Redvented Bulbuls go around in pairs or small parties and are seen practically everywhere. They are omnivorous and eat anything from bread to insects and fruits. They are known to be partial to green peas and on this score they are looked down upon by the pea grower.

Their courtship display is most fascinating to watch as the cock bird flutters its wings droopingly and spreads his tail downwards.

The Bulbul lays three or four eggs of a lovely pale pink colour and richly speckled all over. The female alone incubates. The nest is a neat cup of rootlets placed in a fork or between several upright stems in gardens, forests and similar favourable surroundings. The breeding season is protracted, beginning in spring and ending after the monsoon. When not breeding the birds tend to congregate in groups. In dry country a pool of water is continuously visited by a stream of these birds for drinking and bathing and the air is filled with gay warblings of birds coming and going. Though food scarcity might make for a degree of gregariousness the Bulbul is a pugilist at heart and is always bickering and chasing its kind around. This failing has caught the eye of man and Bulbuls are prized fighting pets and much money has often passed hands for a particularly aggressive bird. Yet, Bulbuls make charming pets when reared from the nest and even wild birds in the garden if regularly fed become charmingly confiding. The Redvented Bulbul, though in no way related to the famed Bulbul of Persian poetry, will always remain whether in cage or in garden, a source of joy to bird lovers.

## REDWATTLED LAPWING

**T**HIS IS THE commonest Lapwing found in India. It needs hardly any description, its name gives away its main feature of identification. Because it is commonly seen, one is inclined to underestimate its handsomeness. It is perhaps the most colourful Lapwing found in the country. It can be seen in every part of the country and is often found close to

habitation. It has been seen in deciduous forests close to streams and in open glades. It is a typical wader being found wherever there is some water but it wanders far from water when feeding.

The Lapwing is a friend of the farmer, picking up harmful insect life from his land. Most farms, both in the hills and the plains, must have their pair of Redwattled Lapwings. It is well known as the *did-he-do-it* bird; this being the sound of its call. It is found in gardens and even in lawns wherever there is some open space. Once the Redwattled Lapwing is confident that no man will molest, it seems to tolerate noise and human traffic, allowing close approach of cattle and vehicles.

Flocking in winter, this bird is seen in pairs in breeding season which starts at the beginning of the hot weather in March and lasts till almost the end of the monsoon. Most eggs are laid during the hot months. At the breeding time, the pair tries to establish a small territory. During courtship, they frequently call to each other, standing erect and spreading their tails. Once a territory is established by a pair, any encroachment by another pair is strongly resented. The pair becomes vociferous and chases away the trespassing pairs. The birds also display courtship in flight. When flying the white band on the wings and the black primaries are distinct. The tail when spread shows a black-and-white pattern. When alarmed the bird emits its characteristic calls of *did-he-do-it*, *pity-to-do-it*.

The nest of the Redwattled Lapwing is made of small pebbles or grit and sometimes lined with straw. This foundation is useful during the rains as it prevents the eggs from sinking into the wet earth. The nest site may be anywhere, in ploughed or fallow land; nests have been found even in a railway yard. In open country, often some high ground is selected for a nest site. This is to enable the birds to have a clear view of the surroundings. The normal clutch of eggs is four and these are brownish-grey studded with blackish blotches. The pointed ends are invariably directed inwards and slightly downwards. The chicks have a black cap, white collar and breast and are grey with some blackish markings. When fully fledged, they are like their parents but much duller, the red wattles not being properly developed.

We found the Redwattled Lapwing easy to photograph; it permits us to bring the hide quite close up once it knows that we do not mean harm to the eggs. Both parents incubate but the female which appears to be slightly less robust than the male does most of the sitting. The sexes are alike, it being difficult to tell them apart. We found that even after the full clutch of eggs were laid the pair would continue courtship. The female calling the male by a repetition of short sharp calls like *titi-tit* which would attract the male to her immediately. While watching the birds at nest, we saw that, when the brooding bird saw someone approaching it from a distance, it would slink off the nest and then start calling over his head or remain silent until he had passed the nest. We also noticed that when the male on sentinel duty gave an alarm call, as when an eagle or hawk passed overhead, the brooding bird would flatten herself on the nest. The House Crow



appeared to be the greatest menace to the pair, and they seemed to know that he was a robber of their eggs and young. Both birds would attack crows flying over the breeding ground and this sort of intrusion by the crows was common. It is fortunate that the crows did not always find the nest, but once located, they would not allow the birds to live in peace until the eggs were stolen. House Crows often make combined efforts to steal the eggs. Many times we have seen the chicks being picked up by House and Jungle Crows. Sometimes, the eggs and young are destroyed by ground predators. In such circumstances we have seen a second clutch being laid. A clutch laid during the hot weather just before the onset of the monsoon is endangered by floods, if the nest site is not on higher ground. In incessant heavy rains many eggs are washed away unless they are placed on stony and well drained ground.

For the novice learning to photograph birds, the Redwattled Lapwing will offer a good subject. He should, however, be careful to place the hide well away from the nest during the initial stage. The incubation period of the Lapwing is about 29 days and so the photographer will have plenty of time to bring up the hide closer within this period. By the time the eggs are hard set the hide will have been placed closer enough for good photographs.

## RUFOSBACKED SHRIKE

SHRIKES ARE EXTENSIVELY distributed over the entire northern hemisphere both in the old and the new worlds. In the Indian subcontinent the Rufousbacked Shrike inhabits plains and hills ranging upto 1,500 metres in the Himalayas, some pairs ascending even further into the larger valleys as high as 3,000 metres. In the plains the Rufousbacked Shrike occurs in scrub and open cultivation along hedgerows. All shrikes have a common family trait of perching on a tree or a post or even telegraph wires scanning the country for ground insects. To this common trait is added the family identity mark of a strong bill and a broad black stripe from the bill passing across the eyes to the ears. The Rufousbacked Shrike is grey above, shading into rufous on the back and rump. There is much black in the wings and tail, the latter being long and narrow. The call note is a harsh grating sound uttered from its perch. The food includes insects, small reptiles and birds. The Shrike has a habit of impaling its prey on thorns while feeding and in order to preserve it for future use. This is known as a 'larder'. The shrikes have also earned for themselves the doubtful honour of being called 'butcher-birds'.

By and large, this is a resident bird. But considerable local migration appears to take place especially after the monsoon, when juvenile birds appear in large numbers. The breeding season commences usually in spring and continues till well after the rains. The Rufousbacked Shrike has a harsh

call. It is also an excellent mimic and emits soft high-pitched whistles. It is found mostly in grass and thorny scrub and in wooded areas close to river beds and streams. The nests are normally placed in thorny trees but this is not always the case. The birds however make little pretence at concealing their nests, being satisfied with their own abilities to drive off encroachers. The nest is a deep well-made cup consisting of twigs and root fibres. It is often placed in a fork just out of reach.

The sexes are alike and though the female normally incubates both help in building the nest and rearing the young. We once had an interesting time watching a nest-building in progress. The bird would bring a soft twig, place it inside the cup, press it down with its breast and then to get the right curve, slowly turn round, pressing the breast all the while against the sides. If the material was not sufficiently pliable it would be dropped over the side and another one brought. The whole operation of nest-building took a week to complete.

The normal clutch is four eggs but there are records of more. The nestlings are fed mostly with ground inhabiting insects and crawling animal life such as beetles, grasshoppers, centipedes, scorpions, worms and small lizards.

Rufousbacked Shrikes are not difficult to photograph as they tolerate the hide at close range.

## SARUS CRANE

**W**ITH A HEIGHT of about 1.5 metres the Sarus Crane is the tallest bird in India. It is a typical Indian bird found in open grasslands, in farms and marshy tracts. Usually seen where water is, the Sarus is easily recognised by its long neck, red head—the colour extending to the base of the head and upper neck—pale grey body and long pinkish legs. The sexes are alike except that the female, when seen close to the male, appears slightly smaller.

The Sarus is a bird well known to the peasant folk of India. It has been freely painted in old paintings during the Moghul period and earlier, and was a popular bird amongst artists. Legend has it that if one of the pair dies, the surviving bird pines to death. Although this may or may not be true, there is no doubt that the Saruses, once paired, are much devoted to each other, and it is possible that they pair for life. Saruses are normally seen in pairs and it is good that the well-known legend is widespread, for this has no doubt saved this handsome crane—our one and only resident crane—from being mercilessly killed and extinguished.

During hot weather the Sarus prefers the waterside. It is often seen congregating in fairly large numbers at lakes and riversides, but unlike the



migratory Eastern Common and Demoiselle Cranes, it does not keep to large flocks but live in small family parties assembling at watering places. At one lake, in the hot weather, we counted 88 birds, which to our mind was an unusually large number. These were not seen in one flock but were spread over the waterside in pairs and small groups.

The Sarus is a common bird with us and is, therefore, inclined to be less appreciated; but those who have seen different varieties of cranes in other parts of the world will consider it one of the handsomest. Its sonorous trumpeting call and its dance-like courtship displays make it an attractive and interesting bird to watch.

In hot weather when the fields are ploughed and there is scarcity of food, we found that the Sarus kept more to the waterside and kept close to extensive farmlands which had green vegetation. On lakes and riversides we found that the Sarus fed much on aquatic plants and animal life; yet sometime it would fly to fields of stubble and pick up whatever it could find close to farms.

In winter, when food is more easily available, we noticed that the Sarus frequented wheat and gram fields and the arid open tracts and plains. During the hot hours, however, and after the early morning feed, the birds are inclined to fly to the waterside and have their siesta there, and then in the evening they may again fly back to the fields for their foray.

The Sarus is graceful in flight, the wing beats being rhythmic with a quick upward movement; the neck and legs being kept extended. Normally, while flying the bird keeps low to the ground, but when basking (high up during the midday sun) the wings are kept spread as it circles. While doing so the light-coloured tertiary feathers are noticeable.

If food is found not too far from its natural haunts, the Sarus is wont to travel such distance on his legs and shows himself to be a good walker. After the evening feed, the Sarus normally returns to the waterside soon after sunset or earlier for the night's rest, and it is a common sight to see a pair flying low over the horizon as the sun is setting over the water. Soon after alighting, the pair may be heard calling to each other in characteristic manner, by lowering the head and then extending it skywards trumpeting vociferously.

This calling to each other by the birds at roosting time is pleasant to the ear and the sound is carried far in the tranquility of the night. On moonlit nights the birds are heard calling frequently than on dark nights and the resonance of the call is distinct and heard from afar, especially over water. At night the birds keep an eye open against predators and emit their alarm note when danger threatens.

The birds indulge in the courtship display known as dancing. It is not necessarily restricted to the breeding season, which is generally the monsoon, as we have seen it at all times of the year. The dance is amusing to watch, both birds responding to each other's gestures. They

bow their heads, arching the neck and sometimes resting it on the back and then suddenly extending it upwards for a moment. The performance is repeated accompanied by flapping of wings and turning round in short circles. Sometimes, the birds leap into the air with open wings and turn round in circles. The finale comes when both birds raise their necks skywards, the bills pointing towards the heavens with necks extended, facing each other and trumpeting loudly in unison; the ending comes rather abruptly after a series of short blasts. In fact it appears a fitting end to an interesting courtship ceremony, the last part of which gave us the impression of two expert fencers giving their salutations at the conclusion of a friendly bout; the whole performance is filled with the dignity and grace that should be expected from two equal partners. When in happy mood the Sarus dances, and one or more families occasionally join in what appears much like some folk dance. The dance does not last for long and is over within a minute, but it may be repeated quite often. The birds do not always trumpet while doing so.

For nesting the Sarus prefers to select some place usually amongst thick reeds where the water is not very deep, and is obscured from view from the shore. However, we have located many nests which were far from being inconspicuous. In rural areas, one may come upon a nest in a very small pond, often placed in the centre amongst reeds and in full view. The large pad of reed bed, which is the Sarus' nest, is generally unapproachable as it is surrounded by water, thus preventing ground predators from reaching it unless they swim. The Sarus is quite capable of protecting its nest and eggs against wild cats and mongooses which rarely, if at all, attempt to reach the nest and we have no evidence of jackals attempting to swim across to a nest. Normally, the Sarus enjoys complete peace during the breeding season. Man, perhaps, is its only enemy, when he attempts to steal its egg or young. In most parts of India, rural folk do not molest the bird, yet lately we have noticed that young boys grazing cattle, sheep or goats, when they find an approachable nest with egg, sometimes play with the egg, throwing pebbles at it and using it as a target, eventually destroying it. Otherwise the Sarus is treated with respect and forms an integral part of the rural landscape.

Regarding the approachability of the nest, we noticed that in shallow water where nests were found, if there was a dry spell in the weather, the water would dry quickly and sooner or later a pathway in mud would be formed which would permit access to the nest. Such conditions, we found, were quite common and it would be then that the birds were open to a certain amount of danger from man or large predators. Buffaloes entering the water and grazing towards the nest may disturb and perhaps occasionally smash an egg. However, we found that the Sarus makes every attempt to protect its egg from animal life.

In areas where rainfall is late, we found that the breeding season is delayed. And in drought years, the birds emigrate to larger lakes and rivers where the conditions for breeding are favourable. Saruses breed wherever good rainfall areas are found.



One to two whitish eggs are laid, they are often marked with lavender and brown spots. The egg is slightly pointed at one end. The conditions most favourable for nesting are during the heavy rains and hence most nests are seen between June and October

It was during August that we found a nest to photograph. The site selected was not the common one of a pad-nest amongst reeds, surrounded by water. It was somewhat unusual. It was placed at one side of a muddy pond, full of murky rain water, and was approachable from two sides without having to enter the water. The nest-site seemed ideal for photography. Only one egg formed the clutch. We decided to put up the hide inside the barbed wire fencing, with the water in the foreground. This we thought would not disturb the birds, as it might have if placed closer. Moreover, we preferred to put our hide in wet ground and in tall grass in the scrub.

As soon as we entered the fencing opposite the nest, the parent birds were alarmed. The bird, which we had watched incubating only twenty metres from the road, suddenly stood up and walked away disclosing the white egg. The mate, which was in the shallow water, flew away. The birds had obviously felt that we had encroached upon their privacy and did not like our entry. The hide was set while one bird which had walked away watched our movements carefully from the bush. Finally, when the camera was ready and one of us had entered the hide, we hoped to get a photograph almost immediately after the rest of the party, which consisted of four persons, had left. We were rather optimistic as we had found the pair of birds allowing us to watch it from the roadside without being alarmed. But now it was different. We had entered the nesting area and the birds were alarmed at seeing the hide opposite their nest. However, both the birds were soon back in the vicinity of the nest eyeing the camera lens. It took, nevertheless, one full hour before one of the birds came on to the nest. The hen bird walked on to the nest after wading through the muddy water, inspected the egg by lowering her neck, the bill almost touching it, and then straightened up suddenly to look at the hide and into the camera lens; again, she put her head down, seeming to adjust a few roots that were lying near the egg and were part of the nest, turned slowly in a semi-circle keeping the head and neck lowered, and then stood still for sometime. Finally, she was on her way down, bending her knees and settling down on her solitary egg. The sight seemed rather funny, the body having to descend quite a way before it covered the egg, and it was done slowly and gracefully. When the bird heard the click of the camera shutter she stood up, looked first to the left and then to the right, and slowly walked away.

The following day the birds had become used to the hide and there was no difficulty in taking a few photographs. Most of our time was spent in watching the birds. We always saw the female stand over the egg and inspect it once or twice and even turn it before settling down. After she had settled, she would sit for an hour or more by which time the cock bird would return and walk straight to the nest; the hen would then leave and

the cock would settle down to incubate. During the hot hours, the sitting bird would get up and slowly walk to the waterside, take a drink and then, after some preening and stretching of the wings, come back to the nest.

Most of the incubating seemed to be done by the hen bird, but when she left the nest to take food, the cock bird sat on the egg. The cock bird spent more time as sentinel than the hen, and was always ready to come to her assistance when she was disturbed. When put off from the nest, both birds would join each other and demonstrate in courtship fashion. However, once the birds knew that we were of no danger to them, they took little notice even when we stood near the hide.

One day it was amusing to see the parent bird lash out at a water snake when it tried to bask on the side of the nest. The snake was rather persistent in trying to climb up into the nest, and finally the hen Sarus had to stand up and look for the snake under the nest as it had sneaked into the squashed reeds which formed the base of the nest. Failing to see it, the bird sat down again on the egg and the snake was not seen again. Once, a pair of Redwattled Lapwings became a permanent visitor to the pool and fed round the edges. They often gave an alarm call when they suspected danger but the pair of Saruses merely raised their heads to see why the call was made.

The young chick, soon after it is hatched, is a light rufous-grey downy ball and is able to walk within a few hours after hatching. It is able to swim and the parents lead it away from the nest into cover of reeds. When it is small, the parent birds maintain a constant guard, demonstrating frequently when its life is endangered and attempting to lead it away from it. When danger threatens, the young drops down and freezes in cover. When older, it follows its parents for longer periods, always keeping to the reeds and feeding out of it. When it has grown to almost the height of its parents, the head, neck, breast, and mantle are ginger coloured, and the red of the head is not assumed until the following year. The legs are not pink like those of the adult, but of grey fleshy colour.

A vital factor responsible for the survival of the Sarus in India is the devotion of its male and female to each other. This has impressed the Indian mind so much, as to create a respect for it. A Brahmin's blessing to a newly wed couple is often to wish it a happy married life like that of a pair of Saruses. It was the figure of a pair of Saruses which constituted part of the coat of arms in one of the erstwhile Princely states of Gujarat. Thus survives a magnificent bird, characteristic of India, which otherwise would have no doubt become extinct long ago. Let us hope that the Sarus lives in peace and perpetuity in this country.





*Purple Sunbird at bird bath*

*Tree Pie at bird bath*







*Tawny Eagle and young*

*Sparrow Hawk at her kill*

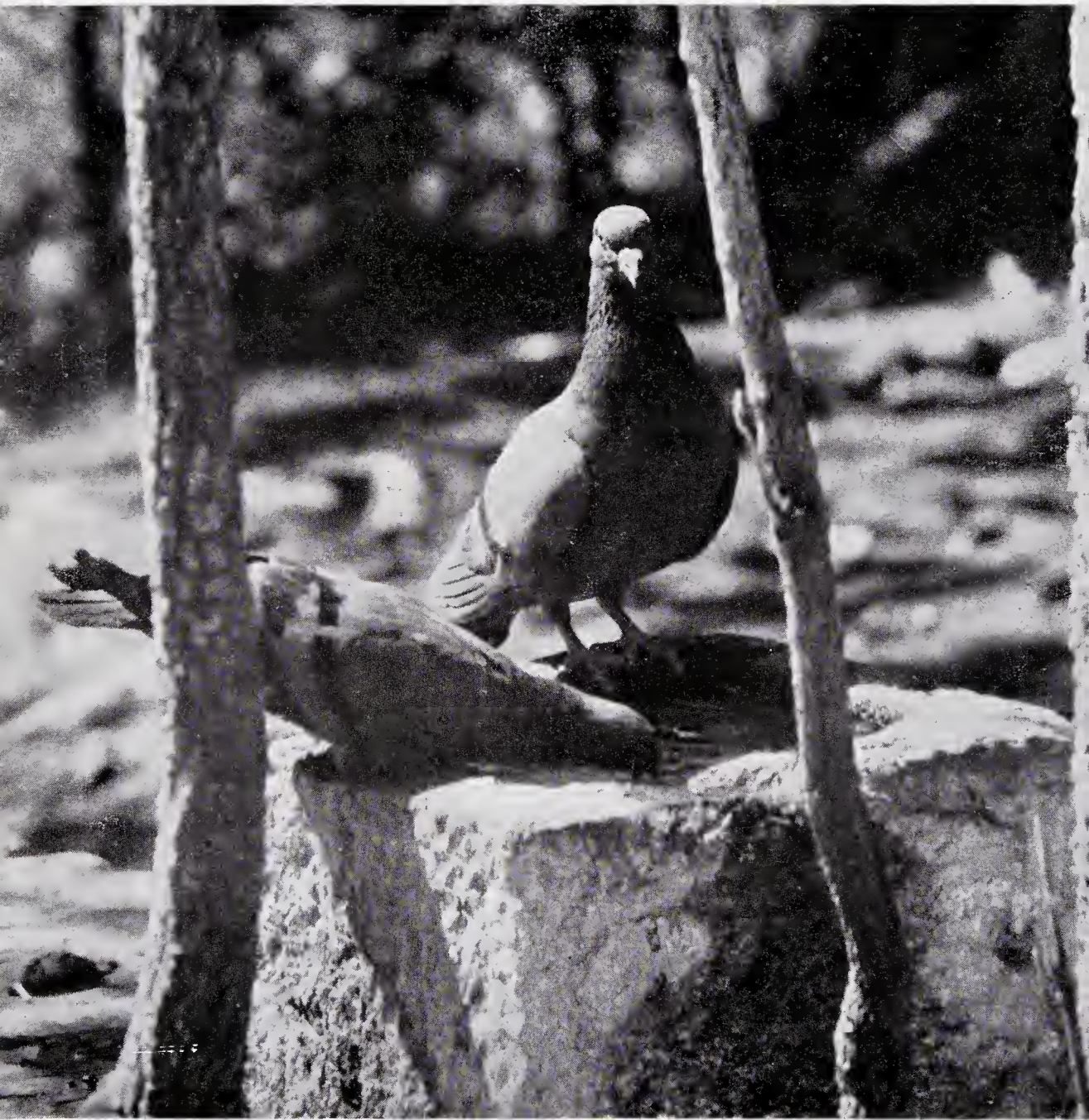






*A pair of Tawny Eagles*





*Blue Rock Pigeons at bird bath*





*Eyes—Right “Rosy Pelicans disturbed while feeding”*





*Spoonbill and Indian Reef Heron feeding*

*Cock Florican attacking Decoy*







*Eyes—Right “Rosy Pelicans disturbed while feeding”*



*Hen Lesser Frigatebird at nest*



## SHORT-TOED EAGLE

**T**HIS EAGLE IS also known as the Serpent Eagle and it has a wide distribution in Asia, Southern Europe and North Africa and yet it is not commonly seen except in the flat arid and hilly areas. In India too, it is largely found in the hills, plains, scrub and semi-desert country.

Although classed as an eagle, this bird has none of the fierceness of the well-known eagles like the Golden Eagle, the Bonelli's Eagle and the Rufousbellied Eagle. The Short-toed Eagle is not a very large eagle, being only slightly bigger in size than a common Pariah Kite, though it has long wings and almost square cut tail. The head is owl-like studded with round orange yellow eyes. The beak is comparatively small for an eagle but well curved. Individual birds vary in colour considerably. The upper parts in most are brown and grey, the lower are white streaked with greyish-brown on the breast and barred often broadly on the flanks and under the wings. Some birds have a conspicuous white forehead and grey patch on the breast and head. The featherless scaled tarsi afford protection against snakes and the slender short toes are well-adapted for catching them. Its food consists chiefly of snakes and lizards as also frogs, rodents, insects and occasionally such small birds as it can overpower.

Gliding with grace and buoyancy, it is seldom noticed soaring high. Yet when it remains poised in mid-air, flapping its wings like a hovering Kestrel, searching for its prey below or about to descend upon it, it is easily recognised. Having seen its prey the eagle drops down swiftly catching it in its sharp clawed toes and then picking it up flies away with it or presses it down to dispose it off with rapid strokes of its beak.

It was in the month of February, that we found a nest of this eagle in a scrub forest amidst stony hills. A large white egg lay in an oval-shaped nest made of sticks and lined with leaves. We decided to camp closeby waiting for the egg to hatch. Not very far from where we were camping was the tomb of a Muslim saint. The priest there happened to be a bird lover. He had kept near the shrine a bowl of water for the birds. During lunch time, we visited this place to take refreshments and to watch the birds coming to drink at the bowl which we named the 'bird bath'. Here we took photographs of the birds drinking water and bathing.

Redvented Bulbuls came in large numbers, so did the Yellowthroated Sparrows. Drab non-breeding Bayas and even Mynas came and we saw Grey Tits, Green Parakeets, Blue Rock Pigeons, Little Brown Doves, Treepies and Sirkeer Cuckoos, the last only drank from the overflow of the bird bath. There were a number of striped squirrels also quenching their thirst.

This was by the way. Our object was to photograph the eagles. Sitting in the canvas hide and looking through the telephoto lens of the camera we could see the downy white chick of the Short-toed Eagle in the nest cavity. The male eagle which in this species is not noticeably smaller than

the female, did most of the work of bringing food for the nestling. However, both parents took turns in shading the young from the strong rays of the sun. On the whole the hen bird spent more time brooding and the cock bird did most of the hunting for food. The cock would fly off at frequent intervals and invariably return to the nest holding a snake or bloodsucker lizard, with tail dangling, in his beak. At the sight of the cock returning, the hen would start calling in a characteristic manner. When the cock alighted near the nest with food, the hen would often take it from him and start a courtship display with her neck and tail raised towards him and with half spread wings flapping. At times the hen would tug the tail of a snake out from the cock's mouth. The cock bird would pay no attention, and after disgorging the food would take wing, leaving the hen to feed the nestling.

A kind of 'defence umbrella' over the nesting territory was maintained by the pair of eagles against other eagles and large birds of prey including harriers and we even saw a King Vulture being driven away from near the nest. Not many birds of prey passed the nest of the eagles at low height and those that did, flew past quite rapidly. Strangely crows were not a disturbance.

At the fledging stage of the eaglet we once saw a White-eyed Buzzard-Eagle alight near the nest to take a piece of snake meat but it did not have the courage to do so. At the early fledging stage of the eaglet, the cock bird seemed to have met with an accident. The familiar and frequent calls of the pair when meeting were conspicuous by their absence. We suspected something wrong and when we did not see the cock at the nest the whole day we were convinced that he had been killed, a mystery which we shall never be able to solve.

However, we imagined that a nocturnal predator may have set upon him while he slept on his low tree roost or that a jungle cat hidden under cover might have caught him in the act of catching his prey. The hen bird was seen mournfully shading the growing nestling and feeding it assiduously. The stony hills were a veritable furnace when the wind dropped but the young eaglet thrived and was eventually fully fledged and on the wing following its lone parent.

The Short-toed Eagle lays only one egg which takes about a month-and-a half to hatch and the young take almost twice as long before it leaves the nest. We had tried to follow this process as long as it was possible but it was never our fortune to spend the entire period at the nest of the Short-toed Eagles. We shall however remember the fidelity with which this pair reared its young and how gracefully the birds took advantage of the air currents as they soared and glided with utmost ease and dived vertically down to catch a snake threading quickly amidst the slender branches of a tree.



## SIBERIAN OR GREAT WHITE CRANE

IF THE QUESTION is asked 'What is our rarest migrant bird?', the answer would be 'The Great White Crane'. In fact, this bird, which resembles in many ways the rare and almost extinct Whooping Crane of Canada and North America, is one of Asia's rarest species of crane; its population perhaps does not exceed six hundred birds. As the name signifies, the Siberian Cranes breed in the remotest parts of northern Siberia although the distribution of the bird is all the way from south-eastern Europe to Japan. We know of this bird as visiting North India in the neighbourhood of Delhi and eastwards but we are more certain about its occurrence at Bharatpur in the Ghana Sanctuary. Here the birds come regularly in the autumn and remain till the beginning of spring.

We were informed that the Great White Cranes are not always seen in the Ghana Sanctuary, but we also knew that everyone was not aware that these birds existed or that they came as winter migrants with the countless waterfowls that visit the Bharatpur marshes. The bird is unmistakable when seen, being large, about the size of a stork, and we thought it was as large as the Eastern Common Crane which it closely resembles. In flight it could be mistaken for a White Stork owing to the tip of the wing being black though this blackness is not visible when the bird is standing and the short dagger like bill is brown instead of the longer red bill of the White Stork.

The Siberian Crane is snowy white, with the legs reddish pink; the naked skin of the face is red and the eyes when closely seen are pale sparkling yellow. The tertiaries or inner secondaries jut out in a tuft of plumes like in the Eastern Common Crane. The call of the bird is peculiar though not unmusical and sounds like *karekhur* repeated often. The juvenile birds that we saw varied in colour, from brown to brown and white probably according to age. The head of the juvenile White Crane somewhat looked like the head of a juvenile White Ibis.

The White Cranes are shy birds not permitting close approach and they remain mostly in water from which they derive their food. In this way they resemble the Sarus Crane, except that they do not feed in the open fields. While the storks feed largely upon animal food and the Sarus on animal and vegetable food in the marshes, grassland and cultivation, the White Crane feeds largely upon aquatic plants and vegetation. Yet we saw the Sarus resenting the close proximity of the White Crane. Moreover, the Ghana has numerous trees standing in water on which many water birds breed and this habitat appears to be suitable to the White Crane also, for seldom are they found in open *jheels* except on migration. That these birds come from hundreds of miles to their special wintering grounds and return to their summer breeding places is obvious.

The Bharatpur bird sanctuary is one of the best in the world in which a great variety of water birds is seen together with a variety of wild

life, including some game animals. Here we saw a large number of different eagles, storks, herons, geese, ducks, and small migratory birds. But we were most excited when we saw the Great White Cranes for we did not think we could see them anywhere else in India. First we saw a pair, then a pair with two young and then as we looked out over the roads that intersected the *jheel* we saw many more, almost all of them feeding in water or amongst rushes in shallow water. At feeding time they seemed to spread out like the Common Crane and as the day became warm, would return to a large sheet of water where they gathered in a flock or in loose groups. They mixed with geese at their resting places. When flying they followed a 'V' formation and often flew quite low. While on their feeding flights they seemed to pass over roads and did not appear to be shy, except that they changed their course when suspicious. Even when much disturbed they never left the Ghana Sanctuary or soared to great heights as do Common and Demoiselle Cranes. The parent birds we noticed took care of their young and never left them alone.

The White Cranes have a dignified appearance and walk majestically, but a little warily, always on the look out for danger. The flight is graceful, the broad black tips to the wings show conspicuously and the birds fly in typical crane fashion with a full wing beat, neck and legs stretched out in line with the body. However, we noticed that the neck slightly sagged when flying. While taking off, the neck was first lowered signaling that bird is about to fly. One or two steps are taken before the bird is airborne.

At the Ghana Sanctuary, we spent most of our time watching the White Cranes, but we could not help seeing so many other birds. During the monsoon season when the sanctuary is filled, large numbers of resident storks, cormorants, herons and even ducks breed in the trees standing in water. Apart from the rare sight of the Siberian Cranes, the bird life of the Sanctuary is enormously interesting with ample scope for bird-photography. This wonderful waterfowl refuge will no doubt one day be declared a National Park where breeding water birds and wild life will be as much of an attraction as the Taj Mahal at Agra.

## SIRKEER CUCKOO

**C**UCKOOS, TO WHICH species the common Koel belongs, are notorious parasites, laying their eggs in the nests of other birds. But all cuckoos are not parasitic and many of them, particularly those inhabiting tropical countries, raise their own families. One of these is the Sirkeer Cuckoo. This species is recognised by its khaki uniform and yellow-tipped bright cherry-red bill. The white tips of the lateral tail feathers are conspicuous when the tail is spread. The flight appears to be weak consisting of flaps and glides.



The Sirkeer is about the size of the Koel. It frequents ravines hedges and fields, where it finds food on the ground or in the shrubberies close above it. The sexes are alike. The dark eyes have long eye-lashes. The Sirkeer is normally a silent bird, but is frequently heard during its breeding season. The courtship call is somewhat reminiscent of the Common Indian Nightjar. One of the commonest call uttered is a *click*. The skulking rodent-like habits of this bird and its normal silence is the reason why it is often overlooked in spite of the fact that it is not uncommon in arid thorny scrub, deciduous forest and grassland.

The food of this cuckoo consists chiefly of large insects and a variety of lizards, which it crushes and swallows entirely, although it may not refuse eggs of other birds or their young, or even an occasional mouse or a small snake. However, the damage done by the Sirkeer to bird life is outweighed by its usefulness in destroying insect life and the maxim of leaving nature to her own devices can be safely applied to this interesting cuckoo.

The breeding season commences in February and continues through the hot weather and rainy season, ending often as late as November. At this time the birds may be seen perched on tops of trees or clinging on to the top branches.

The nest is a deep cup of sticks lined with green leaves. It is placed in an upright fork of a thick branch of a medium-sized tree, or in an overhanging branch amidst foliage. In arid hilly country, the stunted trees on ridges and saddles are favourite sites for nesting. According to our experience the Sirkeer lays from two to four pale bluish or creamy white eggs. The Sirkeer is cautious while approaching its nest. In fact it is possible the bird might desert its nest and eggs if the hide is brought too close. But with young having been hatched, there is little fear of this. Feeding of the young takes place at intervals, sometimes as long as an hour. While feeding its young a hapless grasshopper or some other large insect, the Sirkeer remains poised on the nest for sufficient length of time to permit several exposures. When feeding locusts and such large insects to the nestlings, the parents take care to remove the legs and wings of the insects with their slightly hooked red and yellow tipped bill. The fledglings when hungry call out to their parents with open bills.

## SMALL PRATINCOLE

A SMALL BIRD flying over rivers and lakes and looking like a swallow had for a long time escaped our notice. One hot summer, when we were out photographing the Black-winged Stilt and Kentish Plover at their nests, our attention was drawn to a pair of these little birds. They were

nesting on the same island occupied by Stilts and Plovers. Here was this bird darting up and down swiftly over surface of the water, hawking at insect life or rising up high into the sky behaving exactly like a swallow. In fact, not unjustly has the name Swallow Plover been given to it.

Not more than 18 cms, in length, the bird can run on its short legs quite rapidly on the sandy beach or mud-caked shore, just like a plover. The bird wears a pale sandy-grey coat with black tips to its pointed wings. A black band from eye to bill and a brown forehead distinguishes the head. The breast is smoky-brown becoming whitish towards the belly, with a tinge of rufescent on the breast. The short curved bill and legs are black. The red base and yellowish gape to the bill coupled with the large pale rimmed dark eyes and roundish head gives it a colourful if not a coquetish look when seen at close quarters.

This small bird makes no pretence to be conspicuous and yet it is a bird worth watching and the more we saw of it the more we admired it. The ease with which it flew and turned in the air was exhilarating to watch specially when it made rapid spurts and turned in tight circles or when it made different patterns while in the air, or when it suddenly swooped down to land.

Small Pratincoles are known to gather in large flocks and breed in colony during the spring and summer months, their eggs often being swept away by floods. Rather unusually for this bird, the pair we found was nesting on an island in a fresh water lake; normally these birds nest on the riverside. Two to four eggs are laid but the nest we saw had only two. They were placed on the ground with practically no scrape for a nest. The two oval shaped eggs were a warm buffy pink or stone colour marked with a spray of lavender and brown, though some we have seen were bluish green. Sometimes we heard the birds utter a harsh *krit-krit*, but on the whole they were silent. When changing duties at the nest, one bird would alight some distance away and run quickly to the brooding bird which would rise and fly up or run to the water's edge. The coming bird would often have its belly wet to moisten the eggs. There was no calling to each other at the time and the birds followed a strict and silent code when performing their duties.

In the beginning when we had approached the pair they had displayed injury-simulation, but later they stopped it, knowing that their eggs were safe. Unlike many other ground nesting birds, the Little Pratincole seldom left the nest when we approached it by walking away but remained on the eggs until we were quite close to it when it flew up suddenly. Until then we could scarcely discern the brooding bird. The hide was moved up and finally we were taking photographs of the bird and its eggs from a metre. Once settled on the eggs, the bird would not move but sometimes turn its head to watch its surroundings. During the heat of the day it would turn in the direction of the wind keeping its bill open and we could see water dripping from its mouth. An advantage in sitting facing the wind is that when suddenly disturbed off its nest, it can rise almost vertically into the wind effortlessly.



In the monsoon we saw large flocks of these Partincoles swiftly flying over land as if migrating. Normally they remain on the waterside of large rivers and *jheels* and this should provide bird lovers ample opportunity to watch and photograph them with a certain amount of success as they are confiding birds once their preliminary alarm has subsided.

## SMALL MINIVET

THE MINIVETS ARE a widely dispersed group of birds found over the entire Indo-Burmese region. Most of them are brilliantly coloured with a predominance of red in the males. In India there are about half a dozen species of these beautiful birds, but of these only two are found extensively over the plains. These are the Small Minivet and the Whitebellied Minivet.

The Small Minivet is a sparrow-size bird with a proportionately long tail. The red in the male is restricted to a brilliant shirt-front and the rump. The lower plumage is creamy white. The throat and sides of the face are an almost blackish grey while the upper parts are bluish ash-grey. Bill and legs are black. The female is creamy white below, pale blue-grey above with a red rump patch. In flight both birds show the red in the wings.

The Small Minivet is a bird of orchard country and is numerous in cultivation, flying from tree to tree in small parties. The presence of such a party is always heralded by soft whistles, which carry far but are of low sound, with the result that inexperienced bird-watchers are likely to miss the calls of these lovely little birds altogether.

To say that the Small Minivet is found only around groves of large trees would be untrue, for in the drier parts of the country where acacias and mimosas predominate in thorny scrub, this little bird is equally at home. They nest low down in bushes hardly two metres above the ground. We have, however, rarely seen them alight on the ground.

In habits the Minivet is unobtrusive, but certainly not shy. It can be approached really close and we have watched it on several occasions, at an arm's length. It is then that the pleasant subdued warble of the male and the sharp notes he utters when approached by his mate are heard.

This indifference to man's proximity makes the Small Minivet a joy to photograph, and we have had hides with camera lens only a metre from the lichen-smeared grass, bark and cobweb nest. The cocks, however, were always a little reluctant to approach the nest when one was in the hide but when in the presence of the hen much of his nervousness would be lost. The hen birds invariably were indifferent to the camera on their frequent visits to

and from the nest and while brooding and it looked as though a hide and camera were common place articles in a Minivet's world.

At such close quarters, it is a pleasure to observe the charming disposition of these dainty little birds. The eggs in all nests seen by us were two or occasionally three, but two appear to be the common clutch laid. We will not attempt to describe the colouration of the eggs in detail but only mention that they are pale white and spotted. All we would like to say is, they look beautiful and cosy in the neat cup—nest which may be placed in a fork on a horizontal branch. The newly hatched chicks are covered with greyish white down and look all the world like some fluff sticking to a knot on the branch. Approaching the nest, the parents utter a soft *quip-quip* at which the hungry orange coloured gapes of the chicks open wide. The food usually consists of green grubs six millimetres long or beakfuls of small mosquito-like insects which are brought by the parents for feeding the nestlings. Both sexes feed either singly or together. When both arrive at the same time, the cock waits while the hen feeds and follows when she leaves the nest. This behaviour may have something to do with the male's distrust of the hide and the camera. After feeding, both birds would fly off together singing. At one nest we saw that the hen brooded the chicks as the day grew warmer and the cock would often alight beside the nest and pass some food to the hen and she would in turn either swallow it or pass it on to the nestlings. Very often, on arrival of the cock, she would fly off the nest and return with a beak-load of insects for her young. We observed that when approaching the nest the cock and hen birds would fly low feigning injury to distract our attention from the nest.

The fledglings resemble their mother and it is only after the first moult that the young males acquire their sex plumage.

The gregarious nature of these birds is not too difficult to understand for the Small Minivet is not quarrelsome. Even during the breeding season when parties tend to break up into breeding pairs, we have observed on more than one occasion a dull coloured bird, possibly a male of the first season, flying around with a male of brighter plumage and his mate. In one case, one such bird was seen regularly feeding fledglings of another pair, an interesting behaviour for speculation.

## SPARROW HAWK

THE SPARROW HAWK is somewhat like our Indian Shikra but is larger, longer and has long thin legs and toes. It is distinguished from the Shikra by the absence of a chin-stripe. In most birds of prey the female of the species is larger; so is it with the Sparrow Hawk. In the adult bird the upper parts are brown to slate-grey, the lower parts greyish white



and barred with brownish black. The eyes are golden yellow to orange-red in old-birds. The legs are yellow. The male has the side of the neck and lower parts rufescent. In the immature stage, the birds vary in colour patterns, many of them having heart-shaped designs on the breast and the lower parts. A pale supercilium is present in young and adult birds. The Sparrow Hawk is recognised by its flight; it is fast and generally flies low to the ground. This species is a migrant to the plains where it is seen soon after the monsoon. There are two species found in the country: the Asiatic Sparrow Hawk and the darker Indian Sparrow Hawk which breeds in the Himalayas. Both are found in the plains during winter.

This species prefers shady areas, and hunts mostly during the early morning and late in the evening. Flying fast under cover of some hedge or gully it takes its prey by surprise and seizes it when flushed. Its sudden acceleration of speed when chasing its quarry is awe-inspiring and though it cannot keep up this speed more than about fifty to sixty metres it is enough to overtake its prey. After the Hawk has succeeded in catching its prey it flies to the nearest shady spot and begins to pluck it, often on the ground and out of sight of larger birds of prey which if they have seen it will rob it of its meal. The Sparrow Hawk feeds mostly upon small birds and rodents. It is a courageous little hawk and when hungry will attack birds of its own size. Owing to its courage and speed in flight, the Sparrow Hawk, known as *Badsha*, meaning a king, amongst Indian falconers, was one of the most popular hawks trained during the Moghul period.

The Sparrow Hawk is not often heard calling. When frightened, it emits a short whistle-like sound which is heard only at very close quarter; more often than not, it flies away silently when disturbed. On the whole it is shy, and seeks seclusion in fruit orchards, thickets and forests. We have seen it seated under thorny bushes and in solitary shady trees on islands and lakesides and amongst shady trees in scrub forest. When hunting it leaves its shady abode for open country. After it has had its meal it may take a drink and bathe itself, and later settle in a shady tree or under some bush to spend the hot hours or it may for some time soar into the sky and bask with wings and tail spread.

The Sparrow Hawk is a terror to smaller birds as they have little chance of escape once this hawk is within striking distance. The bird which is caught by the hawk has not much time to think of its end as the firm grip of the toes and the sharply curved black claws of the hawk more often than not squeeze the life out of it. The round sharp beak of the hawk is not always used to sever the throat of the victim but rather for plucking its feathers and tearing out its meat. During the late winter months and in the hot weather, the Shikra proclaims his nesting territory by calling noisily while the migrant Sparrow Hawk keeps silent and tries to escape notice as much as possible. The Sparrow Hawk feeds greedily upon the migratory Grey Quail, Rosy Pastor, pipits, buntings and larks which it follows during its journey northwards to its breeding grounds. In its winter range we have observed the Sparrow Hawk roost regularly in certain trees.

When disturbed from such a place during the day, it literally shoots down from its perch flying swiftly away. The bird may have a separate roosting place at night. It is indeed a pleasure to witness a Sparrow Hawk winding its way swiftly through a thicket, turning gracefully to avoid a slender branch or sapling. In the more open country where there are low hedges, and gullies, and amidst sandhills, the bird hugs the ground while flying, taking cover of a low bush or small tuft of grass which comes in its way, and like an arrow travels straight to reach some bird which is in striking range. How often have we watched eagerly and with admiration the flight of a Sparrow Hawk on the hunt. The success with which this species has been taught in captivity to capture a variety of quarry is amazing and wherever falconry has been practised and the bird found, the Sparrow Hawk has been prized.

## SPOTBILL

THE SPOTBILL IS an endemic duck which is found throughout India and is easily recognised by the bright yellow tip of its black bill and the two triangular fleshy red spots above it. In size it is about that of a domestic duck. When swimming, a distinct white line on the brown upper parts is seen, this being part of the inner secondaries of the wings. In flight, the metallic green and purple speculum is conspicuous as also the orange legs. The Spotbill retains a constant colour pattern throughout the year. The sexes are alike, with the duck being slightly smaller. Its fleshy red spots on the forehead are less prominent than those of the drake. The Spotbill may be seen in pairs and in fairly large flocks. Its nearest relation amongst our migratory ducks is the Mallard. Its call differs according to sex, the drake emitting a soft murmur, the duck a more audible quack. The breeding season varies according to locality and individual birds. Birds may commence to lay in April, but we have found eggs as late as November. Many birds breed during the monsoon from June to October. The duck alone incubates, the drake assisting in fending the young. About seven eggs constitute a normal clutch. They are white with a greenish tinge. The nest is made with the down and soft feathers of the duck which provides a bed for the eggs, though not all nests are heavily lined.

The Spotbill may be seen anywhere in or near water. In hot season when water is found only in large sheets, large number of Spotbills may be seen to gather on them. During the rains, when water is plentiful and small watercourses and ponds are numerous, the Spotbill spreads out, and may be seen often in pairs wandering and seeking suitable sites to breed in. In winter, the Spotbill mixes with migratory duck and is less conspicuous amongst them.



It was during the month of August, when there was a dry spell in the monsoon and when we were searching for a nest of this duck in a large lake that we had the pleasure of watching some Spotbills flying from one shore to the other. Apparently, two drakes were displaying to a duck, first flying in front and then at the rear, as if chasing her. Then after some circles in the air, the three alighted on the water for a short while and then again they commenced their nuptial flight. We closely watched their flight; it was not low over the water nor high but about ten metres above the water surface. The duck was distinctly smaller in size than the drakes, and this was obvious during flight. The swishing sound of the wings when the Spotbills wheeled past us and dived in the air was clearly heard and we could at times hear the whispering notes of the drakes, and see their mandibles open as they called. The duck occasionally uttered a quack when hard pressed or when she had landed on the water inviting the drakes to come forward. On the lake there were five to six pairs of Spotbills on different parts of the shore and the islets and none of them apparently had decided to breed. A week later visiting the same lake, we noticed a single drake sitting on a small islet covered with grass, and this bird was joined by its mate in the afternoon. We, therefore, suspected that the duck was laying and we kept a continuous watch in the early mornings of the following week. Both Spotbills would be seen feeding together in the early morning; they would fly low over the water together and then settle on the water near a large island covered with trees and long grass. After half an hour, we would see the drake return to his usual islet to spend the day. It was obvious from these observations that the island should be investigated for a nest and this we did in the evening. The Spotbill as a rule prefers to lay close to water, under some bushes or in grass. So it was necessary to search the grassy periphery of the island first. In this we were rewarded, for we flushed a duck off her nest. She fluttered out of a bush in the grass close to the water, and splashed into it as if wounded uttering a series of quacks. Then she stopped to see our reaction, and then finally flew low over the water to where her mate usually set. The nest was well concealed and lined with greyish brown down and contained nine eggs. The duck had her entrance from the waterside under cover of the bush which protected the nest and was only about 30 cms. from the water. On the other side the island had a steep slope covered with tall grass and other vegetation, the grass extending to the nest site.

Now that we had found the nest of the Spotbill, we hoped to take a photograph of the brooding bird. The next day a hide was set up some six metres away and then by stages brought closer until it was about three metres from the nest. Every time the duck was flushed from the nest, she would flap clumsily over the water and settle down some distance away, stop and take a look, and then fly low towards her mate. After about an hour or two, we would see the drake become anxious as to why the duck was not doing her duty, and he would chase her back towards the waterside to the nest to have a peep, and almost coax her back on to the nest.

In the first week after the hide was placed we had no success but in the

second, we noticed that the Spotbills took less time in coming to the nest and were willing to take the risk of someone being in the hide. So it was a matter of waiting in the hide with the camera ready before the bird came and settled on its eggs. This was not so easy. Inside the hide it was stuffy and the heat was oppressive and unbearable; though profusely sweating, there was nothing to do but to wait and hope for the best. It was, therefore, a great relief when the pair alighted about forty metres from the nest and started to swim slowly towards it. Then the drake stopped and flew away leaving his mate. Then all of a sudden a movement near the nest was seen and there in front was a small monitor lizard. Something had to be done immediately to save the situation as the lizard is well known for eating the eggs of ground birds. Without a sound, one of the windows of the hide was opened and the mouth and eyes were revealed in order to frighten the lizard. At first the monitor lizard could not make out the new object and so it raised its head and began flashing its tongue quickly like a serpent. Then having perceived the human presence it suddenly became panicky and ran away noiselessly into the long grass. This was just in time as in the next moment the duck swam slowly towards the nest stopping now and then, and being convinced it was all safe, crept into the nest without a sound. She was allowed to settle, after which the trigger was pressed and the photograph taken. The bird hearing the sound froze, and permitted another three photographs to be taken at different speeds.

## SPURWINGED LAPWING

**T**HIS LAPWING WHICH is about the size of the Redwattled Lapwing inhabits the larger rivers of India. It is recognised by its black crest, head, throat and bill, greyish brown upper parts and greyish white lower parts. It has a black patch on the lesser wing coverts and abdomen and a brown pectoral girdle on the breast. In flight, the wing and tail have much black and white giving it somewhat a pied effect. The legs are blackish. A black curved spur may be seen protruding from the lesser wing coverts towards the breast, from which the bird derives its name. The bird is generally silent but emits a short *did-it* or *did-did* call when disturbed or agitated. When the black crest is erect, the bird looks quite handsome inspite of its rather plain colouration.

We had found a nest of this Lapwing containing four eggs on a small sandy islet on the river. The eggs resembled those of the common Redwattled Lapwing but seemed marked with larger blotches of blackish brown. The eggs vary in different clutches some having greyish markings and thin black lines. The pair which was under observation appeared shy, moving out of the way as if trying to keep out of sight as much as possible. The eggs were laid in a depression in the sand with no attempt to line the



nest. As there were frequent hoof marks of buffaloes on the islet, and the sand being dry it was difficult to say whether the birds had made use of a hoof mark or whether they had made the nest themselves. At first it was difficult to find the nest as the sandy patch was covered with depressions made by the animals and the eggs were far from being conspicuous. The pair of birds, though they called out in a half-hearted manner, did not show the same alarm as the Redwattled Lapwings nor did they fly over our heads calling. This made it a little difficult to ascertain whether the birds had laid eggs or not.

As we had failed in discovering the nest, we departed in the boat in which we had come. However, we stopped some sixty metres away in midstream to watch whether one of the pair would return to the nest if there was one. The sand was hot, and we knew that the bird would have to shade the eggs if there were any. We were not wrong. The parent bird quickly returned to where the nest was and for the safety of the eggs covered them immediately. We were now certain that there was a nest with eggs, and we wasted no time in reaching the spot and finding them. One of us placed a hat over the eggs so as to shade them while the hide was being set up. It is essential for all bird-photographers to do this during the heat when erecting the hide. In this connection, we recall an instance when we were once moving a hide close to a nest with eggs of the Redwattled Lapwing. We were so engrossed in the process of resetting the hide, that we took no notice of the House Crows that were flying low over our heads, until one or two had alighted close to the nest itself. But it was too late, because under our very nose two House Crows took an egg each in their bills and flew away with them. This was a calamity we had never thought of at the moment, and it ruined all the steps we had taken in attempting to photograph the birds at their nest. In many instances we have observed House Crows becoming curious and flying over our heads when building the hide. It is, therefore, essential that the bird-photographer should do everything so as to conceal the nest which he intends to photograph, from the crows or any such animal or bird which may endanger the nest.

It took us three days before we could take pictures of the Spurwinged lapwing, and on the fourth day when we were intending to bring the hide closer, we found that the eggs had been taken away. In the short time that was left for us, we were unable to find another suitable nest and many of the eggs in the vicinity had hatched. So we had to abandon further attempts at photographing this bird. Though we had photographed the bird at its nest we were not quite satisfied with the results.

The Spurwinged lapwing has a peculiar gait of its own, moving slowly and with head down giving it a melancholic appearance. The black hair-like slightly tufted crest when erect alongwith the black mask and beard-like design, gives the bird a fearsome appearance like that of some helmeted fighter. In fact the bird is of a retiring character doing its best to escape notice when approached. In its feeding habits, the bird keeps to the water-side most of the time but enters cultivation on the sides of rivers.

## TAILORBIRD

**N**O INDIAN GARDEN is complete without its pair of Tailorbirds. These small, active, loud-voiced creatures are partial to broad-leaved shrubberies where they construct their nest of leaves sewed together with an astounding dexterity for a creature. It is this remarkable nest that has justly brought fame for this little bird indigenous to the lowlands of South-East Asia.

The Tailorbird is unmistakable, hopping inside shrubs, or on the ground, or even along verandah railings, with the tail, its most expressive feature, held at an acute angle above the back. Both sexes are bright olive-green above and dull white below. The forehead is rustly, and on the sides of the throat black half crescents are conspicuous when the bird is calling. The male is distinguished during the breeding season by his greatly elongated central tail feathers forming into 'pins'. In flight, the Tailorbird appears unbalanced by the awkward movement of the tail. When nesting, or a little prior to this, as the mercury begins to rise in the hot summer months, the tiny suitor climbs a perch and proclaims his estate loudly and incessantly, repeating his monotonous call throughout the day. With sex hormones stirring his natural pugilistic tendencies, he now resents even his own image reflected in a mirror hanging inside the house or any window pane, and he spends long and futile hours battling this apparition all the while hurling typical tailorbird abuse. And for the sake of his sanity and one's own, a person, howsoever he may hold this little gentleman in high esteem, has to interfere and show him out of the house.

While the cock Tailorbird is flaunting his masculinity in voice and flutter, the busy hen seeks a leaf, some cobwebs to sew it with and wears herself thin in constructing her home. If the leaf is large, nest holes are pierced along the edges with the beak, and the cobweb passed through with knots to prevent them from slipping when the edges are brought close to one another. The cup thus formed is lined with cotton, soft feathers and even human hair not acquired by scalping the unfortunate owner as done by many of the more unscrupulous members of the human race, but collected by the thrifty Tailor housewife when discarded by the owner. It is however not always that a suitably large leaf is available so as to contain the nest, and then more than one leaf is sewed together for this purpose. The nest is ordinarily situated barely a few centimetres above the ground, and yet it may sometimes be placed at the topmost branch of a mango tree.

The average clutch of three to four greenish eggs speckled with purple-brown is, as far as we know, incubated by the female alone; more observations are necessary to confirm this. But the rearing of the young is undoubtedly shared by both the sexes.

Tailorbirds, like many of our common garden birds, have little fear of man, and accept his movements without any trepidation. Hence, introducing



our hide to them at their nest took hardly any preliminaries. However, finding their nest is not as easy as might be imagined, for living near man means living with his other hangers-on like cats and crows. Further, from a gutter may creep forth a snake or a monitor lizard, all very hungry and all inclined to a morsel of young birds. So the Tailorbirds are most circumspect and do not reveal their one-among-the-many-leave home too readily. And because of the attention of these many enemies being focussed on the nest by the hide, we have always been hesitant in photographing birds nesting in our garden. When we photographed the birds in colour with flashlight, we felt most guilty when setting up the outfit with the flash lamp only a metre from the nest, as we expected the birds to all but desert their young with the flash going off. We, however, planned to remove the hide after the first exposure and leave the birds in peace. But we had reckoned against the Tailorbirds' nature, for when the lamp went off there was no twittering outburst of parental anxiety, but dead silence, and carefully peering out through a peep-hole in the hide, we were astounded to see the male bird poised on a stalk below the nest giving the hide a concentrated appraisal and as nothing followed, he twittered softly to his mate who joined him with food in her bill. Then they both hopped up and down the bush, and around it, and on the ground in front of the camera. Then, possibly thinking that the 'flash' was just another flash of lightning playing in the threatening clouds, they flew off and then without the least nervousness, commenced their normal visits. We, were able to make several exposures, but as the clouds threatened heavy rain, we packed up and left the brave little parents after concealing the nest with pots of plants on all sides.

Tailorbirds are entirely insectivorous, and as such are most beneficial to the horticulturist. But the humble caterpillar once had a laugh when he ate through the leaf containing a freshly constructed nest of his assiduous enemy. And the Tailorbirds had no choice but to look for another nest-site.

## TREEPIE

**I**N CONTRAST TO the sartorial propensity of the Tailorbird it is but right to turn to that lovable rascal of the avian community which is found commonly in our gardens. This is the metallic-voiced Treepie. About the size of a Common Myna, this cousin of the crow has a long bluish grey tail with a black terminal band and is rufescent-yellow all over. He has a dark ashy brown head and a white band in the dark brown wings. The bill and eyes are dark brown to bluish. The Treepie is a scourge to eggs and fledglings of smaller birds. On account of his destructive propensities, it is rightly listed among vermins and is to be discouraged in a garden if other birds are to find a home there. Our photography has often suffered owing

to the egg-stealing habits of these finely plumed vagabonds. In a way, the Treepie is far more dangerous than the crow. The latter is not a serious menace far from towns and villages, whereas the Treepie is as much a nuisance in the vicinity of human dwellings as away from them in the jungles.

If we close our eyes to his bad habits, the Treepie can be regarded quite a likeable avian. He is handsome to look at when in an undulating drumming flight from tree to tree or when he utters musically pleasant notes. It is also easy to gain the confidence of a Treepie by feeding him regularly. He will appear punctually to hop around the tea-table on the lawn, picking up fallen crumbs or those thrown to him. To the bird photographer he provides hard work during the rather oppressive pre-monsoon period when bird photography is an ordeal rather than a pleasure in the plains.

The nest of the Treepie is usually an untidy structure, about thirty centimetres across, made of twigs, mostly thorns, and lined inside with finer material. Three to five eggs are laid. Both sexes incubate and are alike. Though well concealed, the uninhibited aggression of the parents to man or beast indicates the closeness of the nest.

The Treepie apart from being a thief, feeds upon harmful beetles and their pupae and caterpillars. But it is a nuisance to horticulturists as it pecks and eats fruits. Yet in forest areas, we have seen it drink nectar from brightly coloured flowers, often joining other avian groups coming for the same purpose.

## WHITEBELLIED MINIVET

**U**NLIKE THE MILD-MANNERED Small Minivet, the Whitebellied Minivet is the gallant knight of the minivet family. The male is pied, blue-black above and white below, with a rosy patch on the breast and a ruby one on the rump; bold white markings on the tail and wings are conspicuous in flight. The white markings seen from the rear appear like a white 'V'. The female is brown and has no rosy patch on the breast; its ruby-red rump is paler.

This species is not as widely spread as the Small Minivet, but extends over the drier areas of the Central and Western parts of the country. It is a bird of sparse forest and not of orchards, and is also found close to cultivation. In habits, it resembles the Small Minivet for it seldom seems to descend to the ground, yet we have seen it frequently alight on grass stalks and picking off grasshoppers by flying close to the ground.

The males are heard at all times of the year uttering a loud sprarrow-like chirp while flying or when seated on some shrub. The flight is direct and



rather like that of the Wagtail. At the onset of the rains the birds call frequently. At this time the males sing a sort of warbling song from exposed positions and are prone to be quarrelsome. However, when paired off, the pairs move about everywhere together, the male boisterously spoiling all the furtive attempts of the female to remain unobserved while she goes around collecting material for her nest. Finally when the nest is ready, it is a small cup of grass smeared on the outside with cobwebs and placed in usually an exposed position on the upper side of a branch in thorny scrub or deciduous forest. Two or three little speckled eggs are laid and the sombre and less heraldic female takes sole charge of incubating the eggs. This throws much responsibility on the cock to procure food for her. The general urgency for secrecy quieters him down considerably as he toils to and from the nest with food for his family. But even between household chores, he finds time to sing a twittering tune from atop his nesting tree. A sure indication from the sight of a single male is that he has a brooding mate somewhere nearby.

When finally the eggs hatch, both parents care little for the world in general, and direct their sole attention to the task of rearing the young. Nothing frightens them now, and a hide with the shining 'eye' of a camera lens facing the nest might as well not exist for them. We have photographed several pairs from a distance of a metre and one nest from a distance of less than thirty centimetres. The cock and his mate knew no fear, a thing very unusual among birds.

Treepies are their chief enemy ; so are monitor lizards and tree climbing snakes.

When not breeding, the Whitebellied Minivets fly together in loose flocks and we have come across six males together, but individuality is not lost and much quarrelling, singing, and even chasing is indulged in. This species in our experience is the least sociable of all the Minivets we have observed. Minivets with their vivacious colours and disposition are a charming and confiding species. It is an unfailing joy to watch them in the field and from the hide.

## **YELLOWFRONTED PIED WOODPECKER**

**T**HE SMALL BULBUL-SIZED Pied Woodpecker is found in both dry and moist plains, in gardens, in orchards, and in the more wooded parts of the country. It avoids dense and wet areas and high altitudes. It is the commonest species of Woodpeckers seen in the drier parts of India and, like the village carpenter, is heard pecking away at wood even where it is sparse and scanty.

The Flame of the Forest was in bloom when we noticed a pair of these charming Woodpeckers enter our garden and drill their nesting hole in a solitary Peltorum tree. It was February; we had finished most of our field work and had just come home when we saw these birds busy at work. The cock bird is recognised by the scarlet-red hind crown and the darker pied plumage. The mate has a pale straw-yellow crown and a less boldly marked plumage. Both sexes have red abdomen.

The pair of birds we were watching quickly completed their nest-hole. The female laid three to four white oval eggs. Both sexes incubated. Then one day we saw the parents bringing minute insects to the nest-hole which revealed that the eggs had hatched. The round nest-hole entrance is nearly 5 cms. wide and the nest tunnel extends to nearly 30 cms downwards. In the second week we could hear the nestlings chattering and we noticed that larger insects were being brought to feed the young. We commenced photography and were able to see the birds at close quarters. The pointed grey bill of the bird looked as if it had been cut at the tip and we saw the long thin tongue protrude now and then after the bird had fed its young; it was like that of a snake without its forked end. The eyes were reddish brown in colour and the feet bluish grey.

One parent would keep guard of the nestlings by remaining in the nest-hole while its mate sought food; both took this duty in turns, the one bringing food and the other leaving to seek food. There was considerable disturbance by striped squirrels who wanted to enter the nest-hole to make their own home in it. Then a pair of Yellowthroated Sparrows kept on visiting the nest-hole and one even went down it. This happened when the Woodpeckers had neglected their duty. We felt that the nestlings were in danger but nothing untoward happened. A pair of Barhminy Mynas wanted to nest in the Woodpeckers' home but our presence kept them away. The Mynas then decided to select a hollow cavity a short way above the Woodpeckers' home but they were frustrated by a squirrel which was equally keen on that site. However, they succeeded in nesting in the Woodpecker nest after it had been used. A pair of Coppersmiths, carving their nest-hole on a rotten stump on top of the same tree, paid visits to the Woodpeckers and were promptly sent back by them. We realized that there were dangerous enemies of the Woodpeckers lurking in the vicinity—a young pair of mongooses, a young monitor lizard and some Tree Pies, all of whom could enter the nest-hole. Nevertheless our movements kept them away.

In the third week, the parents thought it was safe for them to search for food together leaving the nest unguarded. During this period the Yellowthroated Tree Sparrows were a nuisance and even a few squirrels dared to enter the nest-hole only to be pecked and repulsed by the growing Woodpeckers. In the fourth week, we saw a young Woodpecker accept food at the entrance to the hole. At this time we suspected that one or two nestlings had died as we had seen ants entering the nest-hole. And now we were convinced that there was only one fledgling. Every time the parent



neared the nest with food we generally heard a soft *kickerr* and then after bobbing its head in and out of the nest entrance, the parent bird would go down and feed the young. These rapid movements made photography difficult. The bird would suddenly disappear into its nest and equally suddenly fly out from the nest. However, when the pair changed duties, we utilised the break to press the camera trigger.

Feeding became less frequent as the fledgling grew up and it looked as if the nervous fledgling was reluctant to leave the nest. The parents began enticing it to leave the nest by giving it less food and waiting for the fledgling to emerge from the nest before feeding it. The fully fledged young, when it did come out, looked like any young male of his species. The barred pointed tail of the Woodpeckers was constantly in use as a third leg while climbing or resting and the needle-sharp claws firmly gripped the bark.

The flight of the Woodpecker is undulating; it flies almost in a semi-swooping manner especially when alighting on a tree. But at other times the flight is more direct and rapid. The Woodpeckers are vigilant birds, taking shelter from birds of prey by hiding behind or under the branches of trees, keeping parallel to the branches or trunks of the trees. In mornings and evenings we saw the Woodpeckers ascend the slim topmost branches of trees to bask in the sun. We also suspected them of bathing in water as we saw them drying their wet feathers. Woodpeckers make a drumming sound. Their presence is also indicated by groups of small spots made by their bills on branches and trunks of trees.

## YELLOW-WATTLED LAPWING

**T**HIS SPECIES IS slightly smaller than the Redwattled Lapwing and is about the size of a partridge, but has longer legs. The Yellow-wattled Lapwing is mostly found in fallow land and ploughed fields, seldom entering gardens and places of human habitation. It is a bird of arid stony country and the sea-coast and may be seen wherever there is fallow land. Its call somewhat resembles that of the Redwattled Lapwing but is quicker and in a higher key. The typical *did-he-do-it* is not emitted, but is something like *tee-which* or *tee-which-which-which*. It has also a rather plaintive note which is heard when migrating, often at night.

The breeding season coincides with the hot weather and a late clutch may be found during the rains. The nest and eggs are much like those of the Redwattled Lapwing, but smaller. Sometimes there is no foundation of small pebbles to the nest and the eggs are more heavily marked than those of the Redwattled Lapwing. The nest-site is generally in some fallow land in open ground and we have found eggs in open glades in deciduous

forests. We have seen this bird resting in low stony hills where grass was short and overgrazed. In this type of ground, we found a pair which had taken up its abode under a stunted thorny tree during the hot hours. This pair kept to the ground around this tree and was obviously contemplating nesting there. The pair was in breeding condition and allowed us close approach as much as to tempt us to take photographs. This we did at a distance of about five metres and as we were taking some more, the pair started to copulate right in front of us, and this gave us some rare pictures. It was a confiding pair indeed, as it was not disturbed by our movements and talking.

In flight, the Yellow-wattled Lapwing is faster than the Redwattled Lapwing, and its fuller wing beats and ascending flight make it a more difficult prey for falcons. After the breeding season, the birds gather in flocks and may be seen resting and feeding in fallow land. We found them keeping in flocks more regularly than the Redwattled Lapwing and visiting watering places less often. When feeding, a flock may scatter, then a bird may be seen picking up some food and a few birds joining it, the birds emitting a series of soft calls. This bird though resident wherever it is found, is a local migrant especially after the rains. Once disturbed from its ground it flies up into the sky and seems in no hurry to return to it.

